

Game Media Literacy

Christian Swertz, University of Vienna

December 2016

Abstract

Game Media Literacy can be defined as educational processes that are specific to games. Game Media Literacy is elaborated by discussing learning in games, learning about games, learning by game design and learning from games. In the discussion, the relevance and autonomy of Game Media Literacy is shown.

Keywords: Game Media Literacy, Game Literacy, Gaming Literacy, Education, Media Literacy

1. Introduction

Game Media Literacy can be defined as educational processes that are specific to games. These processes specifically include learning that takes place while playing games, education that takes place while designing games, learning about games and learning from games how to teach. Applying games to teach and learn content, like in serious games or edutainment products, is not included in the definition of Game Media Literacy.

While the expression Game Media Literacy is used by some scholars, most scholars refer to educational processes that are specific to games as Game Literacy. It seems to be obvious that games are media for most researchers, while the term media is hardly used. Instead, the word text is used as a synonym for media in Game Media Literacy. Occasionally, text is replaced by narratives, which leads to expressions like digital multimedia narratives, a broader expression that refers to meaning-making and overlaps with Game

Media Literacy in many respects. Sometimes, the word Gaming Literacy is used also. Since the different words are not connected to fundamentally different concepts, but discuss different aspects of the same phenomenon in similar perspectives, the term Game Media Literacy can be used as a synonym for the different expressions used in the literature.

The discussion about Game Media Literacy started after the turn of the millennium. If there was a starting point, the book “What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy” published by James Paul Gee in 2004 can be considered as such. Most papers refer in some respect to Gee’s work, who quickly published a number of further books and papers about Game Media Literacy after 2004. Since the discussion about Game Media Literacy did not start before 2004, there are hardly substantial changes in the understanding of Game Media Literacy yet.

All understandings of Game Media Literacy are connected to a certain understanding of text. The first part of contemporary definitions of text is most often a delimitation to narrow definitions of text. Narrow definitions of text are assumed to restrict text to printed texts and to texts that are regarded as high culture. In contrast to a small understanding that is restricted to high culture print artifacts, the definition of text in the field of Game Media Literacy includes multimedia and multimodal communication and popular culture. In turn, high culture print artifacts are hardly considered. This is obvious - it’s difficult to play with these things. Still, they are sometimes used as elements in games.

As it is connected to a broad understanding of text, Game Media Literacy can be seen in the context of Media Literacy. Media Literacy refers to definitions of text that include multimedia and multimodality also. With the term Media Literacy, objectives for teaching and learning about media are addressed and consequences for pedagogies are derived. This includes a focus on the relation of making as creative hands-on production and critical reflection. Considering practices from certain media cultures, considerably from online cultures, is also part of both concepts. Still, the suggestion to

learn from games how to teach is rejected as uncritical in some theories of Media Literacy (Buckingham 2007). This can be explained by an important difference: While the rejection of certain media and certain media practices by people that use media is in the horizon of Media Literacy theories, this is not the case for games in Game Media Literacy theories. In other terms: Theories of Game Media Literacy are focused on gamers, considerably on-line gamers, and their culture.

In the discussion about Game Media Literacy, four different perspectives can be distinguished:

- 1) Learning in games
- 2) Learning about games
- 3) Learning by game design
- 4) Learning from games

These perspectives are discussed in detail in the following chapters.

2. Learning in Games

Connected with the perspective of learning in games is the assumption of a possible transfer of positive skills to real life. In this respect there seems to be a contradiction to the widely accepted argument that violent behavior in games is not transferred to real life. While this argument is widely accepted by scholars that research Game Media Literacy, it is hardly explicitly discussed in Game Media Literacy research. This missing discussion can be explained by the common assumption of player's agency. Due to their agency, game players are capable to distinguish between violent pictures on screens and strategies they use to win games. Based on this distinction they transfer strategies, for example to win competitions in markets, but not the pictures that show weapons. This assumption is expressed in the development of specific didactic methods that show how to transfer skills learned in game and by participating in the gaming culture to other parts of the life world.

Competencies that are developed in games do not only include strategies,

but also spoken language literacy. Empirical evidence from the field of on-line gaming suggests that this applies to native speakers and to English language learners of all ages. Some studies highlight collaboration also. This is connected to the fact that many games require collaboration. If the game requires collaboration, the educational objectives are expressed in the structure of games. In this respect, the game mechanics, the game engine etc. are considered as texts. In these texts game designers and producers express their ideas and thus become teachers for gamers. Beside language literacy and collaboration, identity development is highlighted in the context of Game Media Literacy. While some critics argue that being a avatar in online games hardly helps to solve problems in real life and thus assume a simple copy from game to real life process, Game Media Literacy experts show that learning to play with identity is the crucial point here. In games, people can alter their identity or create a new one without exposing their personality. If the identity fails, they just create a new one. By playing with online identities they can discover concepts that might be transferred to other parts of their lifeworld.

Another aspect of the transfer problem is the game debriefing process. It is also argued that the information ecology needs to be considered when discussing what is learned by playing games, because playing games is often connected with participation in online communities. In this respect, this aspect is located between learning in games and learning about games, since synchronous and asynchronous online communication in a player community is not playing the game, but communicating about the games. Additionally, it does not only take place while playing and the communication is often not restricted to a particular game or playing games at all.

3. Learning About Games

The second perspective is learning about games. In this perspective, Game Media Literacy is often connected to ideas of critical thinking, consideration of cultural contexts, and creative actions. Learning objectives are in this perspective not derived from games, but from general theories, like theories of

justice. Games are used as opportunities to facilitate learning objectives in a way that considers common interests of learners.

Critical thinking is connected to the consideration of inequalities and diversity. Important areas mentioned in the definitions of critical thinking are gender justice, people with special needs and race.

To teach critical thinking, the importance of a metalanguage to analyze games is highlighted. While teaching grammar as a metalanguage in lessons that focus on printed text is common knowledge for teachers, this is not the case for the grammar of games. This is connected to the fact that a commonly accepted metalanguage for games has not been developed yet. Sometimes, Systemic Functional Linguistics are suggested as a background to develop such a grammar of games.

While the importance of a metalanguage is discussed, it is not assumed that players develop a metalanguage or critical thinking by just playing games. It is assumed that teaching about games is necessary to reach these objectives. Suggestions for pedagogies reach from analyzing games to the development of games, with a clear favor for the later one.

4. Learning by Game Design

The third perspective, learning by game design, might also be understood as learning about games, while the instructional design changes from reflecting by theory to reflecting by doing. In the literature, this perspective is sometimes addressed as Game Design Literacy. Studies highlight that Game Design Literacy requires well trained educational staff that has not only experiences in playing, designing and implementing games, but decent knowledge about Video Game Theory. As benefits of teaching Game Design Literacy the development of critical thinking, of collaboration skills and of an adult attitude towards games is highlighted.

Some studies claim that learning by game design has become a common practice to teach computational thinking. While teaching computational thinking and critical thinking at the same time is quite possible, as studies

demonstrate, the integration of both aspects is taken into account in some concepts for learning by game design only.

5. Learning from Games

In the forth perspective, learning from games is highlighted. Some scholars suggest to transfer teaching and learning methods used in games to teach how to play the games into real life settings, considerably into schools. Using the structural elements of games like high score lists or quests in other contexts is sometimes also labeled as gamification. Gamification theories are developed by analyzing games.

This idea of learning from games should not be confused with learning content like history or economics while playing video games.

6. Contexts of Game Based Learning

These four perspectives are theoretical distinctions that do not imply fundamental differences. To the contrary, they are all related to each other and can be connected in practice. One obvious example is a gamified game design project in school. Obviously, a gamified instructional design needs to apply gamification principles. These principles can also be discussed with the learners to give a first opportunity for critical thinking, in this case about gamification. Additionally, when designing games, the limitations and structures of games need to be considered. This fosters critical thinking as well. When playing the designed games, learners learn what they put into the game. They teach themselves and reflect their own design decisions. If they develop the game in education that applies project based learning, they learn how to design, conduct and evaluate projects as well. The relevance of transferring project management competencies is obvious.

While most of the examples used to illustrate Game Media Literacy are taken from digital games, Game Media Literacy is not restricted to digital games. With the concept of Game Media Literacy, board games, face to face roll play games, card games and other types of games are included as well. Thus, computer technology is not vital to use Game Media Literacy con-

cepts in practice. Other types of games can be used as well. This opens the concept for teachers and learners that are not familiar or do not want to become familiar with digital games. One reported example are librarians that challenge students with knowledge quests. By doing so, they turn the library into a game. The rules of the library that determine where you can get gadgets or skills are interpreted as a game engine, and the librarians turn themselves into some sort of non-playable artificial intelligence like characters.

As Game Media Literacy is specific to games, it is assumed that the educational processes indicated by the term do not take place while people use other media or while learning in other settings. Games are considered as an aesthetic sphere of its own right. This is connected to the famous words of Schiller (1794): “Denn, um es endlich auf einmal herauszusagen, der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt“ [For, to finally speak it out at once, man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays] (Schiller 1795). Still, the connection from Schiller to Herbart and his influence on education all over the world is hardly considered.

The discussion about Game Media Literacy is connected to the discussion about dangers that are caused by video games. This connection is addressed by terms like “alternative literacy practices” that are used in connection with Video Games, which suggest a positive meaning of playing video games. In this respect, the term Game Media Literacy is used as a combat term to defend video game culture against raiders from book culture and religious fanatic cultures, considerably Christian religious fanatic cultures, that consider games in general and video games in particular as devil’s work. Reservations regarding games have a long tradition in Christian culture (Huizinga 1949).

Based on Discourse theory, the idea of respect for different discourses, and the rejection of putting bans on certain discourses it is suggested to pick up gamers Discourse in non-gamers Discourses and vice versa. An example is

a dialogue about games students play in class, that is with teachers as presumable representatives of a non-gamers Discourse. A dialogue like that can increase respect for the respectively other discourse. It also allows to reflect cultural practices like social class or cultural values and thus to develop critical thinking (Squire 2005).

Good chances to learn something useful in games (where useful is not restricted to relevant in a competitive capitalistic economy to earn money, but might also mean relevant for personal development and development of societies) justifies games as relevant for informal learning. All scholars who research Game Media Literacy argue that there are good chances to learn something useful in games and from games. The arguments range from theory of play through game analysis to empirical research. The Game Media Literacy discourse convincingly argues the relevance of games for learning and the individuality of the aesthetic of games. Thus Game Media Literacy is relevant for society today.

Literature

Buckingham, David: (2007) Media education goes digital: an introduction, *Learning, Media and Technology*, 32:2, 111-119, DOI: 10.1080/17439880701343006

Gee, James Paul (2007): *What Video Games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Second Edition. St. Martin's Griffin.

Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Squire, Kurt D. (2005): *Toward a Media Literacy for Games*. *Telemedium* (52) 1, 9-15.

This work is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Austria License. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/at/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California 94105, USA.

