

Children Transmedia and Virtual Experiences Inside and Outside the Classrooms

Pilar LACASA

Culture, Technology and New Literacies Research Group

University of Alcalá. Spain

Abstract: This presentation examines, from an ethnographic perspective, innovative education settings where children explore media as proactive participants in virtual and transmedia universes. The main goal of the project has been to identify innovative educational practices whenever commercial video games, combined with other new or traditional technologies, are present in the primary and secondary education classroom to develop new media literacies in students. Analyses have been carried out following an interpretative and discourse analysis approach. The results show how video games, combined with other technological tools, could be educational tools contributing not just to motivation in the learning processes but also to children develop new ways of being literate persons.

Keywords: videogames, children, informal learning, popular culture, children as producers, new literacies

1. Aims

This presentation includes the results of a **systematic study on children's transmedia experiences in the classrooms when commercial video games become educational tools**. Specific aims of this presentation are the following:

1. To identify what children and adults can learn from certain commercial videogames and how to learn from their hidden curricular perspective.
2. To explain why they can be combined with other media and information technologies to develop students' new media literacies.

2. Living transmedia experiences in digital worlds

Let us focus on our theoretical approach. Some years ago Henry Jenkins set the context of the transmedia concept, meaning information comes from multiple channels and diverse media. According to Jenkins [5] we have entered an era of media convergence that makes the flow of content across multiple media channels almost inevitable. In some way **being digital in 2010 means also being transmedia**. Even further, in the context of the new media people can be much more than just receivers of information. We are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media, towards one in which **everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced**, says Jenkins [5]. Furthermore, participation is related to the output of ideas, materials and other products viewed as valuable within a certain culture. Other perspectives on participatory culture can be found in several theoretical authors (for

example [2]) especially those who are close to the socio-cultural approaches [1] [3]. To sum up, in order to live transmedia experiences and to act proactively in virtual worlds, as citizens engaged in civic endeavours, children need to develop new literacies allowing them to be not just receivers but also producers of contents in the digital universes [2] [5].

3. Methodology

The research has been conducted from an ethnographic and action research approach from the 2006/2008 school year until now in three Spanish public schools. One of them is a Secondary Education institution and the other two teach Primary level. The research team collaborated with educators and students adopting the role of participant observers. We were interested in observing, analyzing and explaining these practices, learning their meaning; hence, our results may help to enable educational and innovative scenarios in school and families.

As mentioned, the project has been carried out within the elementary and secondary *school environment where very differentiated experiences took place*; each one of them is defined by the following features: a) the *participants*, namely boys and girls, their teacher and the research team; b) *the school*, as the physical and social context where the activity takes place ; c) *the video game* around which the different activities are organized..

We worked with the following data types [4]:

- **Ecological observation of the work sessions** with support from audio and/or video recordings of the events.
- **Oral discourse that serves as the means of communication among participants in a classroom environment.**
- **Written documents, photographs and audiovisual documents** provided by the researchers and by other participants, in small groups or individually.

In relation to the analysis and interpretation processes we adopted a combination of ethic (in accordance with the meaning assigned at the completion of the anthropological research) and emic perspectives, the former giving priority to an objective approach, the latter taking into account interpretations from the participants. This analysis methodology is not new to educational and developmental psychology. Silvia Scribner [6] first used it in the 70s, adopting the approach from social-cultural psychology. Other authors have also used it recently both in the educational field as well as in the study of the media. We understood analysis as a circular process in which interpretations begin even during the fieldwork. Analysis has been carried out using both AtlasT 6 and NVivo 8 software.

4. Working with the teachers and children inside and outside the classroom

The activities in the classrooms were organized around **different workshops**. We define them as innovative scenarios where new technologies coexist with other already consolidated ones; in these scenarios, opportunities are created for boys and girls to gain new abilities related to digital literacy. In the workshops, video games coexist with the Internet and the blogs, as well as with other tools (for example photo or video cameras), which contribute to educating in the use of multiple communication codes.

For each of the groups, researchers and teachers jointly determined a set of educational objectives closely linked to the presence of video games in the classroom. Moreover, before starting the workshop sessions we worked on preparing the teachers for the

experience. The activities carried in and outside of the classroom were as follows: **Collective sessions to inform** about the project and discuss proposals; **Training sessions** in which the research team shared with the group of teachers the purpose and methodology for the workshops; **Individual interviews** between teachers and the research team; **Practical playing classes and multimedia production training**, in order to help students become familiar with the games and multiples discourses to express their opinions and ideas about the games.

5. Some results

The results of this project have been discussed around the different emerging issues that constituted the subject of our investigation. Two main reports have been elaborated, both for [Primary](#) and [Secondary](#) Education, in relation to this research (<http://uah-gipi.org/ingles.htm>). In this paper we will just focus on some results that show how children and young people establish relationships between virtual and real world in multimedia productions. The main results could be discussed around the following topics:

5.1 Virtual and real life working with the Sims 2 Pets in primary schools

As we said before, one of the main goals of the project has been to explore new ways to bring children closer to the media in order to enable them to become citizens capable of dealing with them in a critical way. One of the main characteristics of The Sims 2 is related to its potential for creating new content by transforming other content or by being inspired by other content.

The classroom as a multimedia studio

The classroom became a photo studio where children performed the same activities as the research team. This was a preliminary step before they were given cameras to be used at home with their families, outside the school and the virtual world of The Sims. Through the game, digital pictures and by publishing children's texts in a class weblog <http://ceiphenares.blogspot.com/> they were able to discover their own familiar environments.

Remaking and reconstructing

We try to act in a creative way; this applies not only to the children but also to the teachers and investigators. Rather than repeating the same activity, once we've departed from the video game we can "reconstruct", "remake", and "rethink" it. This is a way of re-making creatively what others have done. In this context it was necessary to look for new resources. This example shows how video games combined with other media and cultural instruments, in this case photography, become a tool that allows children to build relationships not only between the family and the school, but also among transmedia phenomena present in popular culture and also in the virtual world.

5.2 New languages and literacies in Adolescents: maquimia and media production

Audiovisual productions represent a specific means of expression that teenagers have access to in their leisure time, but that are scarcely present in schools even today. Technological advances from the last few years have eased access to these creations online through sites such as MySpace, Facebook or YouTube. They have become producers of content and not just recipients. We will focus now in another example in

order to show how adolescents can combine transmedia experiences in their own productions.

Being conscious of the rules of the game using multimedia productions

The example that we present now is part of a biology class, with the participation of adolescents between 16 and 17 years of age, along with their teacher, in an ongoing program of bilingual (English and Spanish) course of biology. In this case we worked with the game Spore.

Adolescents Between real and virtual worlds

The students' final multimedia productions are [available on YouTube](#)¹. A quick look at this audiovisual product shows how these small groups of students introduced themselves in the multimedia and digital universe and how they presented some issues that related to their own identity.

6. Some general conclusions

These pages try to show how commercial video games may be turned into educational instruments. It is clear that this goal is closely linked to the fact that people tend to resist the idea of videogames as educational tools; sometimes they prefer to believe more in society's static models to explain this society rather than to accept that social relationships may be mediated by new as well as by old technologies. Therefore, once we have explored the power of videogames in the generation of a creative thinking process, expressed when children created transmedia productions in digital worlds, we have showed how we were able to introduce them into the classrooms and collaborate with children and teachers in order to create innovative educational settings. Following the ideas by Jenkins (2006) and Gee (2003) and our own experiences in some classrooms, we have discovered the importance of living in digital worlds, creating context multimedia, and offering new ways of thinking and reasoning.

7. References

- [1] Bakhtin, Mikhail (1965/1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- [2] Castells, Manuel (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Gee, James (2008). Video Games and Embodiment. *Games and Culture*, 3(3-4), 253-263.
- [8] Green, Judith L., Camilli, Gregory, & Elmore, Patricia B (2006). *Handbook of complementary methods in education research*. Washington DC: AERA & LEA.
- [5] Jenkins, Henry & Lacasa, Pilar (2010). Learning in a Participatory Culture: A Conversation About New Media and Education. *The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, http://henryjenkins.org/2010/02/ children_and_young_people.html (February 8, 2010 (Access, April 26, 2010)).
- [6] Lacasa, Pilar, Méndez, Laura, & Martínez, Rut (2008). Developing new literacies using commercial videogames as educational tools. *Linguistics & Education*, 19, (2), 85-106.

¹ <http://www.uah-gipi.org/multimedia/>

- [7] Scribner, Silvia. (1985/1997). Thinking in action: Some characteristics of practical thought. In E. Tobach, R. J. Falmage, M. B. Parlee, L. M. Martin & A. Scribner (Eds.), *Selected writings of Silvia Scribner* (pp. 319-337). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.