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Playing Games: Creating the Neo-liberal Person?

The compelling attention to digital games that consumes so many is foreign to me. I feel as separate from that world as I do from any of the myriad of human cultures that I know by little more than their names. Yet I know that digital games have become a significant part of the economy, as well as to social and educational futures that do concern me a great deal.

The estimated sales revenue of digital games in a recent year was $10 billion, more than the total intake from movies on a global basis. The latest release of Grand Theft Auto took in $500 million in the first week alone. Canadian companies that create these games are major producers, including Rockstar Games who created the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise.

I'm not sure of why the world of games seems so inaccessible. However, the reality is that I would still much prefer to sit down with a novel than explore the game world. I can't even get myself to try out the Sony Playstation attached to our TV set.

Maybe the generational difference is a reality. Some would dismiss me as one of the "digital tourists," as opposed to the "digital natives," the term rapidly becoming a cliché about young people who have grown up with the computer and the Internet as a part of their environment. These digital natives, according

to the claim, are so immersed in these media that they take to the games as just another part of the environment to engage for entertainment. My family, on the other hand, did not even have a black and white TV with a couple of channels until I was sixteen. Presumably the lack of exposure means that I have missed out on developing the digital gaming instinct.

Maybe. But maybe my aversion has more to do with social and political connections that I make — particularly to the military. For more than fifteen years, my image of video games has been from the television news accounts of the bombing of Iraq in the first Gulf War. The point being made was the similarity for the pilots of what they saw as they dropped bombs to what they had seen in the simulation games that they used in training. The pilot did not see a target, but only the image of the target on the console, looking just the same as a simulation in practice. It helped me to imagine more recently how dozens of people at wedding parties in both Iraq and Afghanistan have ended up as bombing victims.

My association of games with the military was reinforced a few years back when I read about the online game created by the U.S. Army (with great originality, called *America's Army*) as a part of their recruiting process. They offered a free, but sophisticated, game environment aimed at developing positive attitudes toward a military life by potential recruits. Close to two million people have reportedly played *America's Army*. The Army spent $8 million on developing the game, and other branches of the U.S. military are developing their own versions.

Or maybe my critical faculties have been overwhelmed with the many negative media stories that resonated with something from my own experience. *Bully*, created by Rockstar Vancouver, for example, has come under attack by the BC Teachers' Federation, the Canadian Teachers' Federation and even Education International. The British release of the game is called *Cannis Canem Edit*, Latin for Dog Eat Dog, because of complaints about encouraging bullying.

The news stories about addiction of many Chinese young people to digital games, for example, also had some resonance for me. We once had a student from China staying with us for a few months. She was often up in the middle of night because, with the time difference with China, that was when she could be

online playing games with friends there. Was this an addiction to the medium, or was it primarily a way to maintain contact in the face of the strange language and culture in which she was immersed?

Despite my negativity, I have felt compelled to find out more, to attempt to develop a critical understanding of the development and role of digital gaming, especially in relationship to the implications for education.

So where to turn?

Not to games. Sampling a few games doesn't seem like it would be helpful. I would be focusing all my attention on learning the "rules" and how to navigate according to those rules — not a very good way to develop a critical understanding. Unless, as some game creators have tried to do, the game itself is designed to help create a critical perspective on gaming.

Rather, I have turned to text. Maybe it is just self-justification for my active avoidance and aversion, but I think not. Some folks out there are thinking, researching and publishing in books and on the web about these issues, looking at the social and educational implications of digital games.

A Canadian academic society has been created called the Canadian Game Studies Association and it held its second annual conference this year. It publishes an online journal called *Loading* (journals.sfu.ca/loading). After their recent conference, like many academic groups, they held a social event. Unlike most, the program included playing the musical game, *Guitar Hero*.

Typology of games and education

This is a report on some discoveries from my exploration of a variety of texts, some from the popular media and some from academic looks at digital games, particularly in relationship to education. I have identified three categories that had particular relevance to my interest in exploring the socio-educational meaning of games:

- Games of persuasion
- Games as participation in ideological systems
- Social impacts of games

Games of persuasion

Sometimes called "serious games" or "social impact games," games of persuasion have an explicit purpose in their content. These can be tools that either reinforce existing institutional control or disrupt established ideas and patterns.

The U.S. military has already been identified as a group that has turned to games as a way of persuading young people. They are hardly alone in this, though. Corporations and industry groups have produced their own games, and entertainment businesses like Disney have extensive online activities particularly aimed at children.

Non-governmental organizations, such as those environmental activist groups have joined the persuasive game world. Greenpeace has some simple games that are really illustrations of its campaigns, such as "Nuclear solitaire" and "Swim with the whales" (http://www.greenpeace.org/international/fungames/games)

The United Nations has its Cyberschoolbus with games like "Stop Disasters," with the simulation video game having the gamer "learn how to respond to different disasters" (http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/).

Vancouver-based activist, Terry Lavendar, has produced a game that contrasts with the big-budget, global sales games of Vancouver's Rockstar. *Homeless: It's No Game* puts gamers on the street to survive for 24-hours. (http://wetcoast.org/games/homeless/homeless.html)

Political parties have used games as forms of reinforcement or contestation. The Republican party in 2004 produced "Tax Invaders," mimicking "Space Invaders," with George Bush shooting down tax proposals from John Kerry. "The player fires projectiles out of the top of Bush's head to 'shoot down' the tax hikes and defend the country" (Boogst, 2007, 79).

Behind these games is a belief that the playing of games can influence beliefs and behaviors. They take advantage of the graphics and the engagement that comes from playing the game to create either confirmation or change in attitudes. The left-wing Canadian Dimension magazine, for example, promoted Homeless in an article called "Games for People Who Want to Change the World."

We might use some of these games to help students develop a critical sense — one form of media studies.

Games as participation in ideological systems

While games of persuasion are explicitly aimed at influencing ideas and behaviors, others are ostensibly for entertainment, but also persuade, but less openly.

One of the most popular consumer games, *Grand Theft Auto*, has been a prime target of those concerned about the social effects of first-person shooter types of games. Beyond the violence, though, there is also an ideology that is framed by the game. This may not even be understood by the creators of the game, and is unlikely to be noticed by the gamer unless it is brought to the foreground in a way that allows the player to see this hidden framing.

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, a game in the series, has particularly generated analysis of the underlying cultural assumptions, probably because it involved players in trying on the persona of an inner-city Black gangster. The optimists hope that this frame might lead players to "ponder the limited choices and identities presented to African American males or representations of African Americans in popular media" (Squier, 2006, p. 21).

A pessimistic perspective sees quite a different impact. Ian Bogost (2007) says San Andreas presents a conservative ideological frame on crime — that it is rooted in individual choice and morality. It doesn't set crime in the social and economic disadvantages of the life of the character and leads the player to "participate in the metaphor of crime as decadence" (p. 83).

The frame that a game creates is nicely captured in the name of an article by Peter Jenkins (2004) about forms of control even within role playing games: "The Virtual World as a Company Town — Freedom of Speech in Massively Mutual Online Role Playing Games." While these role-playing games are relatively free-form, control mechanisms can rest with either a game administrator and/or through social pressures from other players.

The interactivity of the game, regardless of the content, may contribute to socialization of individuals into being a "neo-liberal subject," according to Kylie Jarrett (2008). Jarrett suggests that the interactivity and the user control in the game produces the citizen as entrepreneurial and individual consumer who exercises choice — key elements of the neo-liberal conception. This, Jarrett claims, is embedded throughout Web 2.0, not just in computer games.

Of course, the apparent agency in games is within a context and that context may well be hidden from the participant and invisible in the game itself. Part of that social context is in the technology itself. The history of computer simulation is imbedded in military techno-scientific development, with it then moving into commercial applications.

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Trying out different frames for games can bring out the "hidden curriculum" aspect.

The *Painstation* is one effort to bring out the relationship of contemporary games to their military techno-science origins. The *Painstation* is a modified Playstation that administers electric shocks when the players lose a point in a game. Torture tournaments turn this into a theatrical performance event aimed at challenging conceptions of video games (Crogan, 2007).

Gonzolo Frasca, as a critic of the dominant commercial basis of games, has proposed a "Videogames of the Oppressed" approach, based in the work of the pedagogy of Paulo Friere and the application of those ideas to theatre by another Brazilian, Augusto Boal. Frasca's approach is to design games that "produce critical reflections and speculations on the game's construction of the real world — real and imagined, existing and potential" (Crogan, 2007, p. 94). It uses gaming as a form of consciousness-raising.

As an example, Frasca created a game called *September 12th: A Toy World*. The first screen of the game challenges the win-lose nature of games: "You can't win and you can't lose…This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror."

The player has missiles to shoot at "terrorists" in the Middle East. When the player fires, only sometimes does the missile hit the target, but it always hits civilian collateral damage. Each act of destruction produces more terrorists. The number of terrorists only seems to stay stable when the shooter stops shooting missiles.

The hoped-for impact is to open reflection on the assumptions of both the shooter element of anti-terrorist games and of the political and cultural assumptions framed by games.

Social impact of games

An important issue in looking at social impact of anything is to identify not just who is there, but who is excluded. It is a truism that digital gaming has been a field with a strong gender bias. Commercial financial success has come primarily with action, shooter games, not those that are based on cooperation.

Not that all guys are into that type of game, but much of the audience that does exist for existing games is male and young. Further, computer science is one of the few areas left in post-secondary education that is still primarily a male domain, and thus most of the game designers are men.

Some folks are trying to change that. The RAPUNSEL project (www.rapunsel.org) is one example. The designers felt that socially-oriented environments might be more conducive to encouraging female adolescents to develop computer skills that they could then use in their own design of game environments.

The project developers felt that the reward system of a game is "tightly coupled with the values it expresses" (Flanagan, et al, 2007, p. 244). They made code sharing a source of rewards as the female students worked on their projects. The more others used one's code, the more the reward — similar to the open source concept in general.

In contrast, appealing to the market is in theory another approach to pushing for games beyond the existing audience. If games are developed that are attractive to a wider demographic, the producers will sell more and make more profits. In the market approach, commercial game publishers that want to expand sales would seek ways of encouraging women, who make up a larger proportion of those who do not play these games, to be interested in this form of social activity.

Claims to digital games having a social, rather than individual, basis fit in a number of categories.

One is the "location-based game." An example of this is *GeoQuest* of Marseille, France. It was a history game aimed at families. It combined an adventure story and puzzle hunt that sent SMS messages to participants as they entered specific cells of a mobile phone network. Drawing from this example, the ubiquity — and problematic nature — of access to cell phones by students in school might be turned by teachers to some engaging educational projects.

Multi-player, online games can turn out another location-based social form. The developers of a game called *Scoot* surveyed the audience they were looking to reach — university students — on whether they preferred a game played at home competing against a computer, playing with others remotely, or playing with others in the same location over a local area network. They found that the preferred option was playing in the same location and combining competition between teams with cooperation in working on teams (Polson, et al, 2007).

Games develop a sense of agency, but is that real or a powerful form of manipulation?

Not surprisingly, major corporations have found new ways to capture our kids by adopting the multi-player platform for commercial purposes. Disney's *ToonTown* has more than 100,000 subscribers to the online role playing game aimed at age 7 to preteens, presumably including some students in Canadian schools. The basis of the *ToonTown* as a game, according to the description on the site (seemingly without recognizing the irony) is:

> players, as Toons, join forces to save the world from the invading robot Cogs — humorless business robots who are attempting to turn the colorful, happy world of Toontown into a corporate metropolis.

The online VirtualWorldsReview says

> *Toontown* is designed to make kids feel that this is a space where they are in charge. Things like squirt guins and pies in the face are not only encouraged but specifically incorporated into the game as official battle tactics to be used against the Cogs. (http://www.virtualworldsreview.com/toontown/)

This fits very much into the type of media that Juliet Schor critiques as being structured to frame adults as enemies of students and people to be manipulated for the purpose of having the medium be on the child's side in a conflict.

Are digital games good for education?
Wrong question.

Although it was the question I started with in looking at the literature on games, I now think that there are too many important aspects that must be actively explored by teachers. Digital game environments are part of the mindworld of many of our students and we should explore their meaning with them.

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Is play in games a powerful form of learning, one that can reclaim for older students the joy of learning they had as young children?

Or is this kind of play another form of creation of the neo-liberal person who comfortably fits into a neo-liberal system. In talking about social networking, Trebor Scholz (2008) says "it's important not to forget that we, the users are guests in the house of the Social Media giants." The same is true in the game world. With our imaginations and limited resources we can create our own relatively simple games, but the games that dominate are those made by the game industry giants.

Explore the educational use of games, yes. And develop ways to help make visible for students the assumptions and values that are embedded in the games they play.

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