
Playful Learning Experiences

Meaningful Learning Patterns in Players' Biographies

Accepted at the "Meaningful Play Conference 2010" submitted to the "International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations (IJGCMS)"

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*I think. like. both of them (playing and drawing) were answers to the same problem.
But ... you know. On different ends of it.*
–Olivia, Art Student, 21

*I think that it was... I don't know...
I would say that my live would be really different if I never played that game.*
–Sarah, Student, 25

Introduction

In some cases mediated experiences transform our understanding of ourselves, others and the world. We 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 un-lived emotions – we all go through meaningful learning experiences like that. Certain media-based experiences strike our minds at particular phases of our lives, in relation to space and time and in context to specific subjective experiences. Statements as "This book changed my life" or "That movie opened my eyes" and "This song helped me get through this hard time" document how experiences made through technical media can foster the transformation of ourselves. Thus, transformative learning processes can not be standardized, they do not happen to everyone through the same media, at the same time and place. A book that one person calls "live changing", might be boring or implausible for the other. The reasons for this discrepancy is founded in the taste, the pre-experiences, the state of mind but also in the domain of the problems a particular person has. Furthermore, different forms of media hold different potentials for transformation. Therefore each type of media provides its own specific potential to foster the transformation of its user. Experiences made while reading a book, are different from those evoked through a film or by listening to a piece of music. Furthermore, we learn differently through diverse forms of media, as they foster specific forms of attention, activity, interaction, reflection and transformations.

Nowadays computer games are a central part of our culture and they accompany our lives. We use games as intermediate playgrounds for our interests, passions, values and beliefs. Computer 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 following investigation, the question as to whether games encourage us to develop meaningful learning processes, is a question yet unanswered.

Today we know that players play passionately (Yee 2006), that they learn to recognize and participate in different semiotic domains (Gee 2003; Gee & Hayes 2010) and in specific cultural spheres (Jenkins 2006). But how players reflect deep and fruitful experiences in games and how they connect their learning through playing games to their lives is the pivotal question in this paper. Do mediated experiences achieved in digital games, transform the way we understand ourselves and the others? The following exploration, will outline basic theoretical assumption on playful learning experiences. It will provide central insights found in a novel narrative study on learning biographies in games. Furthermore the question how computer games evoke the players transformation will be reflected and discussed.