

Goal-Orientated Activity in Story Games

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Abstract: This poster is a theoretical argument for the use of activity theory to better understand the role of *goal orientation* in playful learning contexts. Of particular interest is the “story game,” a rules-light, narratively-driven, tabletop roleplaying game. Here, it is posited that identifying the goal-directedness of players leads to a better understanding of the activity system and, therefore, learning within the system. Moreover, activity theory provides a useful analytical toolkit for the investigation of *story* as a transformative element of play, and the relationships between the lived experiences of players, mediators, and goals.

Introduction

For many, a sociocultural view of learning and development is historically rooted in the tradition of dialectical materialism. This framework grounds learning in the discovery and resolution of contradictions, characterized in the tension between the internal and external, the psychological and material (John-Steiner & Mahn, 2007). Vygotsky (1978) considered a dialectical approach to be the *only* adequate means to understand the complex process of human development and learning, one marked by qualitative transformations of social signs into internal psychology functions. Simply put, one of Vygotsky’s core assumptions is that learning is *socially mediated*. Activity theory (Engeström, 1987; 2008) expands this notion by establishing the minimal unit of analysis to be *activity*. This theoretical framework is extraordinarily apt for the study of games and learning, as it allows for the study of the processes of gameplay rather than its products. In this poster, I apply an activity theory framework to the play of analog roleplaying games to better understand story as a mediator of play and play as a mediator of story.

Activity Theory

Activity theory analyzes activity by attending to individuals (or groups of individuals) who are oriented toward goals and mediated by tools, rules, community, and divisions of labor (Engeström 1987; 2008). Squire (2002) offered activity theory as a potential theoretical framework for investigating the idiosyncratic goals of players, capturing the dynamic interactions of gameplay, and understanding broader sociocultural contexts of play. For example, whether the goal is winning a game or learning about a phenomenon differently transforms the player, the act of play, and the surrounding system. DeVane and Squire (2012) applied activity theory to digital media and learning technology. Here, the goal of activity was ludic (i.e., winning/completing the game) or educational (i.e., a specific learning outcome). However, a particular genre of game – the *story game* (Duncan, 2014) – exists wherein the collective goal (or object) of activity is the collaborative construction of story. And so, using activity theory as a lens, story games may provide new perspectives on the relationships between purpose and play in goal-directed activity.

Story in Goal-oriented Activity

Goal-orientation is a focal point of activity theory. According to Roth (2007), conscious goal formation and subsequent transformation is inseparable from mediated activity. In the context of games for learning, story typically mediates the resolution of a subject and their ludic or narrative goal (see Figure 1). For example, story can mediate a series of event-based experiences, grounding a player’s progression through and immersion in a game. In the context of educational games, this goal is typically tied to learning about a particular phenomenon. Though this is perhaps a simplified representation of mediated activity in games, the intention is to forefront story as a mediator of gameplay.

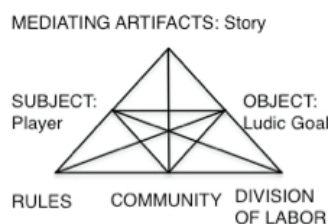


Figure 1: Activity in educational game.

However, in story games, the players’ goal becomes story building (see Figure 2). The game, now functioning as a mediator, *transforms narrative, while narrative simultaneously transforms the players and mediating artifacts*. In this form of joint activity, the collective goal of story directs play, although idiosyncratic individual goals can still be

realized. Further work can address the relevant mediators of activity in story games (i.e., rules, community, and divisions of labor) and their appropriation. Due to the rules-light, analog design of story games, preliminary work suggests that these mediators may play a central role to the transformation of play in story games. In other words, changing the purpose of play necessarily reshapes the relevant mediators of activity.

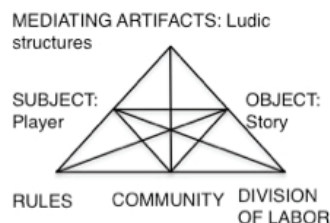


Figure 2: Activity in story games

Discussion

In the field of games and learning, the role of story in motivating play and design has been a connecting theme among many scholars. Of course, not all games are designed to tell story. However, story can be intentionally embedded into a game's design, arises out of the emergent conditions of play, or connect to pre-existing narrative associations (Jenkins, 2004). Regardless, the rhetoric surrounding the relationship between games and story often places story as a mediator of a larger ludic or educative goal. To be clear, the suggestion is that story can mediate ludic goals (e.g., mastering a set of skills or systems), narrative goals (e.g., progressing through a plot or timeline), and learning goals.

This poster is aimed at demonstrating the potential for a new and exciting genre of games to inform and expand studies in games and learning. At the same time, if we take activity as central to learning, this poster offers a method, theoretically grounded in activity theory, for the investigation of story in playful contexts of learning. Activity theory appears to be well suited for the analysis of collective activity in story games. Moreover, activity theory can articulate the role of mediators in educational games and story games. Overall, this poster offers activity theory to explore the ways in which story mediates and is mediated by player experience, providing the tools for identifying contradictions and critical moments of learning through play. In all, story as a mediator of ludic and instructional goals presupposes a particular kind of game and role for instruction. Story games problematize this application as they provide clear and provocative examples wherein ludic goals and educative goals are peripheral to story.

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