

Reflective Gaming Course: Supporting reflections on the effects of gaming

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Abstract: The *Reflective Gaming Course* was developed to support young people's reflections on the potential positive and negative effects of playing games, and thus support more informed and reflective gaming practices. The course was empirically investigated in UK secondary schools, and a commented version of the course was discussed in this workshop. Attendees were presented with some aspects of gaming: tangential learning, cognitive gains, problem solving skills, and stereotyped representations of race and gender. They were invited to reflect on whether and how these aspects relate to their own gaming practices. They also heard about how the topics and activities were perceived by young people in the previous empirical studies in schools, such as how young people reacted, their prior perspectives, etc. The workshop concluded with reflections about the potentials of this game education proposal and opened the discussion for attendees' perspectives.

Introduction

For decades there has been research on the permanent effects of playing digital games on players. It is true that sometimes some of those research findings are reinterpreted and appear in the mass media – such as when journalists provoke panic by associating gaming with shooting tragedies, while others would argue that “games make you smarter”. However, with some exceptions, young people are to some extent alienated from academic discussions about the effects of playing games. There are some proposals – normally theoretical ones – that address this issue, suggesting processes of game education. This workshop offered a summarized version of the *Reflective Gaming Course*, adapted from a broader research project for the GLS Conference context. Attendees were presented with ideas similar to the ones presented in the *Reflective Gaming Course* conducted in schools, and were invited to think about the rationale, potential outcomes, and the students' reactions to the topics and activities. Attendees were also asked to discuss the proposal and relate to their own practices as teachers, researchers, and others.

Workshop Aims

On the one hand, the workshop aimed to invite attendees to reflect on whether their gaming practices relate to the research findings regarding the positive and negative effects of gaming, in order to support more reflective gaming practices. It allowed attendees to construct their own understandings of how the generic idea of effects of gaming relates to their gaming practices in a more concrete perspective. In other words, attendees had an experience in the workshop analogous to the young people who participated in the *Reflective Gaming Course* in schools. On the other hand, the workshop presented the *Reflective Gaming Course* with commentaries on previous experiences in order to inspire participants to design their own game education courses in their own contexts, and allowed attendees to discuss the game education proposal that guided the project.

Program

Attendees were told about the topics that were evaluated as more enriching from the original course. Because the original *Reflective Gaming Course* was approximately four hours long, the topics are presented very briefly in this one hour session.

Course introduction

The workshop opened with an explanation of the game education proposal, contextualized within other proposals in the literature. Game education can be conceptualized in a variety of ways: the proposal presented in this workshop has some similarities with the theoretical proposals of the media educationists Fromme (2012), Partington (2010), Sanford and Madill (2007) and Newman and Oram (2006) in the sense that they consider that the content to be taught includes the effects of gaming beyond the gaming activity itself. Therefore, this game education proposal includes teaching about the effects of games, encouraging young people to reflect about whether and how the claims regarding the effects of gaming relates to their own gaming practices, in order to stimulate critical and reflective gaming practices. This concept brings together two different areas of research: the literature on the effects of gaming and the one on game literacy, which considers that there is something about games that is worth

teaching. This perspective focuses on the agency of players to take informed decisions and influence the effects of their own gaming practices, respecting players' autonomy. It differs from other perspectives because (a) it does not place game creation as the main activity to develop game literacy, (b) it focuses on the effects of playing that extrapolate the game activity itself (and not in gaming aspects that remain "in the game"), (c) it includes the positive effects of gaming as well as the negative, and (d) it encourages learners to develop their own understandings, opinions and ideal gaming practices, instead of having an ideal model of gaming *a priori*. This conceptual proposal of game education was initially presented in Albuquerque and Ainsworth (2013) and Albuquerque (2014).

Attendees were also asked to identify themselves and reflect on whether and how this proposal relates to their own practices as teachers, researchers, and others. Some examples of other contexts of game education are: teachers educating students in schools, parents educating children at home, or friends educating friends in informal contexts, or media professionals (e.g. journalists) educating their audiences. Amongst the attendees there were several points of view, including teachers, journalists, game designers, game researchers and parents.

Positive effects

The first topics of the original *Reflective Gaming Course* were the positive aspects of gaming. One of them was tangential learning, i.e. searching for more information about an element of a game theme, such as searching for information about the Roman Empire after playing a game set in this context. According to the empirical studies with the *Reflective Gaming Course*, tangential learning was widely experienced by young people prior to the empirical studies. The topic had raised interest of young people and related to a very concrete learning potential associated with games, thus allowing them to share experiences and conceive new possibilities of tangential learning.

The other topics involved cognition and problem solving. Many claims have been made about cognitive gains and problem solving skills that can be developed by playing games. Some studies in this area were mentioned in the workshop, and an exercise from the original course was explained in which young people had to reflect upon the potential cognitive gains of their favorite games, with the challenge of thinking about the contexts of their lives (when not playing games) in which the skills are concretely useful. It aims to develop a critical perspective on such research findings, and also an awareness of the potential cognitive gains of the individual practices of participants. This topic also raised the interest of students in schools, especially because it offers a positive perspective of gaming, which is frequently seen as only negative, harmful, and time wasting. Hence young people perceived this topic as a way to fight negative stigma upon gaming.

Negative effects

The last topics were related to the character representations of games, including gender and racial diversity (or lack of diversity), and the stereotypes conveyed by some games (as in other media). These issues as well as the kinds of heated discussions it generated in classrooms were considered. The resistance of young boys to be sympathetic with regard to women representation in games, as well as some of problematic ideas about gender that they expressed in course, illustrated the need for further discussion about gender and race in schools, which became evident when the original *Reflective Gaming Course* was offered. The potential outcomes to encourage players to undertake a critical view on games, thus perceiving the problems of representations critically, was discussed in the workshop. It included the idea of players as critical consumers.

Debriefing the course

The last slot was open for questions and comments. Some extra questions were problematized throughout the course according to the discussion flow:

- ❖ Is the practice of reflectively playing games likely to generate concrete outcomes to the players?
- ❖ If we consider that supporting a more reflective and informed gaming practice is something relevant for players, what are the best contexts in which it could be undertaken?
- ❖ If players become more informed and reflective about the games they play, what could be the consequences to the game industry? And to the research about effects of gaming?
- ❖ What are the other initiatives of game education that are already being conducted today, which approach is similar to this one?

Presenter

Rafael Marques de Albuquerque presented the workshop. He was in the last year of his PhD in the *Learning Sciences Research Institute*, at the School of Education of the University of Nottingham (UK). In addition to his studies with the *Reflective Gaming Course*, he has worked in research projects involving game creation in schools, the usage of commercial games as pedagogical tools, and educational game design. Rafael has a BA in graphic design and MA in design and graphic expression and in both degrees his research focus was on the various relationships between digital games and learning.

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