# Problematizing Games and Learning: The Ideal Trajectory and Cultural Ideologies

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**Abstract:** In this presentation, I will problematize claims about the educational value of learning through vide game cultures by examining critiques from critical digital studies and critical cultural studies. The first problem with the claims made about learning through video game cultures is that it assumes an ideal trajectory towards video game participation. The second problem with the claims made about learning through video game cultures is that they do not address explicitly the embedded cultural hegemony that students are also learning. By bringing these concerns into the discourse and proposing possible alternative approaches, this presentation aims to engage with this medium from a critical position in the field of games and learning.

## Introduction

As an art educator and player, I am deeply intrigued by the attention on video games and learning, as it suggests new ways of conceptualizing education and school curricula. Using the content, mechanism, and experiences of engaging with this medium as curriculum, schools have appropriated this cultural practice to demonstrate the need for active participation in any semiotic domain. Beyond the realm of education, many video game players are learning to become active cultural participants in both the society at large and within specific video game cultures.

As Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009) pointed out, “scholars can be said to have responded to this young medium with one of three broad stances: condemnatory, celebratory, or critical, positions whose popularity and influences have approximately followed a chronological sequence” (p. xxiv). Currently, scholarship on video game as an educational medium has bypassed the condemnatory phase, and takes a predominately celebratory position (Whitton, 2014). However, I am critical of certain celebratory claims made about learning through participating in video game cultures.

The cultural practices within the video game cultures in relation to the society at large has not gone unchallenged, and the classroom application of these practices also has its problems. Players and students are learning to become active participants of cultural practices, but what is the value of this learning when the cultural practices are situated within a stratified and hegemonic society? Critical Internet Studies suggest that we should, “especially take a look at how freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are limited by unequal conditions of access (money, education, age, etc) and the domination of visibility and attention by big economic and political organizations” (Fuchs, 2012, p.404).

In this presentation, I will problematize the celebratory claims about the educational value of learning through vide game cultures by examining critiques from critical digital studies and critical cultural studies. Specifically, I will address the ideal trajectory of learning through video game participation assumed by educational scholars and the cultural ideologies dominating this cultural practice. By bringing these concerns into the discourse and proposing possible alternative approaches, this presentation aims to engage with this medium from a critical position in the field of games and learning.

## An Ideal Trajectory

The first problem with claims made about learning cultural participation through video game cultures is that it often assumes an ideal trajectory towards video game participation. The ideal trajectory refers to learning that happens through active participation in all the cultural practices within this domain. Players are all able to learn to decode this semiotic domain through engaging in play that embodies this domain.

According to Gee (2007) and Duncan (2009), the educational value of video games lies in the developmental path of video game cultural participation. In the beginning, players are merely consumers. They learn to play the game by playing it alone and playing with others. They become familiar with the rules that govern the game world, or semiotic domain. They also acquire membership in related affinity spaces that supports their consumption in existing media as well as their production of modified media. With the knowledge of the game world and support of affinity spaces, players are encouraged to transition into prosumers. By becoming prosumers, players are able to exercise the designer mindset and begin to think critically and systematically about the medium and the domain. They are able to see the limitations existing in the domain, and propose modifications to the existing restrictions or creative

solutions to improve the domain.

However, this argument does not address the issues of exclusion that often happens through cultural barriers. The uncritical application of commercial games in schools furthers existing exclusions by assuming a universal experience among students. This ideal trajectory can be broken down in terms of two assumptions: the ideal player and the ideal game.

## The Ideal Player

In the ideal trajectory, the ideal player is central to the conclusion that video game players become learners of cultural participation. The ideal players are able to access video games and participate in full as active prosumers within affinity spaces. This assumption disregards the issue that video game as a medium is situated within a socio-cultural context. Existing hierarchies and stratified social relations within a society influence who is able to produce and consume media and how media is produced and consumed. These relations are brought into the virtual worlds through digital divides.

Beyond the digital divide between developed and developing countries, there is a digital divide among generations or same-age cohorts (Coleman & Dyer-Witheford, 2007). The first form of digital divide stems from class (Fuchs, 2012). This divide may take the form of simply denying access to platforms where video games are played. The more pressing and easily neglected divide comes in terms of the proficiency and literacy about the medium inherent in the ways this medium is accessed. Players who can only play at library computers are significantly limited in their access. In a practical sense, this translates into exclusion. Players who have access to games at home and even have the economic power to purchase advanced technological hardware with better graphics or Internet speed are going to have a significantly different experience of engagement and degree of participation.

Another form of digital divide stems from cultural identities, including race and gender. The digital space is overwhelmingly white (McPherson, 2012). While the issue of race is related to the issue of class, it is also a fact that the semiotic domains of video games have constructed practices and languages that speaks to a predominantly White audience. At the same time, genres of video games have revolved around subjects that have long been associated with masculine domains (Taylor, 2006). Even though female gamers are no longer a rarity, the recent #Gamergate incident, where female gamers and game designers were the victim of cyber bullying, goes on to demonstrate how players continue to receive differential treatment based on gender (Hathaway, 2014). As video game cultures are semiotic domains that are more associated with certain cultural identities in real-life, they are not equally welcoming to all players and those with outlier identities may not progress in the same way as the “ideal” player (Nakamura, 2000; Taylor, 2006).

If schools do not address this assumption of the ideal player, adopting video game cultural practices as curriculum reinforces the existing hierarchy of engagement. Students who have been more proficient in this medium will probably show greater interest and perform better as video games speak to domain knowledge with which they are already familiar. At the same time, disenfranchised players may be further disengaged in schools.

## The Ideal Game

One problem with discussing video game cultures is that there are such a wide variety of genres with which players engage. Though the assumption of the ideal game is often made explicit in educational scholars’ discussion of learning through video game cultures, the term “video game cultures” may be an over generalization. Projecting a single learning trajectory for how different players might engage with a given cultural script is also to overgeneralize.

Gee (2007) and Squire (2011) have claimed that the learning trajectory they are formulating largely depends on “good games” that build learning principles into the designs. Good games allow players to learn the semiotic domain in an efficient manner, while allowing for experimentation and failures. However, transition into active cultural participation relies heavily on affinity spaces, and these may not exist for all good games. At the same time, even if there are active affinity spaces, the level of engagement is not guaranteed.

In their argument about the value of video games as curriculum, Parks (2008) and Schulzke (2012) refer to, “serious games” that present a sense of social realism and prompt problem-solving of real-life issues. Serious games certainly may challenge players to consider consequences in ways that may not occur during casual play, but such games remain on the margins of video game culture. Ironically, this marginal status may be precisely because of the educative function. As most popular games are popular largely because of their amusement and entertainment value, serious games often reject the norms of having players become powerful agents with god-like abilities—

qualities that are desirable to many players (Flanagan, 2009). The independent development of serious games also means that they are less well known; the developers do not have the same access to marketing and publicity. Because of this, the learning that serious games engender may take the form of isolated incidents in schools instead of mirroring larger cultural practices.

Perhaps the only way to avoid these problems is through overt recognition of the ideal trajectory and conscious actions toward addressing its limitations. This trajectory may apply to some players, but it must be understood that it is not the only trajectory. Similar to children's development in drawing, there is no linear developmental model that can adequately generalize the multiple learning trajectories. Instead, Duncum (2000) proposed a "diverse pathways and multiple endpoints" (Duncum, 2000, p. 38) model of development that places emphasis on understanding individuals' learning trajectories. Given the diversity of personal experiences, it may be more fruitful to propose multiple pathways and multiple endpoints of video game engagement across different genres and players.

### Cultural Ideologies

The second problem with the claims made about learning through video game cultures is that they often do not address explicitly the embedded cultural hegemony that students are also learning. By cultural hegemony, I mean the beliefs, values, and norms that are imposed and have acquired consent as cultural norms, which maintain the status quo (Gramsci, 1971; Rose, 2012). It is the ideologies that are shared among most people but benefit only a small group of people. Video game players do learn to become active cultural participants in both the society at large and the specific video game cultures. But what specific cultural ideologies are accompanying this practice? In the following, I will address two prevalent ideologies within video game cultures, which is the meritocratic norm and play as free, or uncompensated labor.

## Meritocratic Norm

Pulos (2013) and Flanagan (2009) claims that video game as a medium is shaped by and contributes to the cultural hegemony of the socio-historical context within which it is situated. Nowadays, video games can be found in most countries around the world, but this medium is most developed in capitalist societies with contemporary liberal democracies, such as the United States and South Korea (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). In such societies, the "meritocratic norm" is a large part of the cultural hegemony (Schulzke, 2012). According to Kernohan (1998), the meritocratic norm is the belief that, "natural ability should determine material ability to form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good" (as cited in Schulzke, 2012). The success and failure of an individual and his or her mobility within the social hierarchy is viewed as a direct result of his or her work ethic.

The idea that individuals have the power to control their destiny, despite structural limitations, is reflected in most popular media, and this includes video games (Schulzke, 2012). Instead of confronting it, the procedural rhetoric built into the technological aspect of the medium mirrors this meritocratic norm. Players are constantly given feedback through point systems or verbal comments that allow the player to modify their behavior in pursuit of the goal. In many popular video game titles, players are placed into a position of powerful world-makers. The prosperity of that world is a direct consequence of the judgment and abilities of the player. At the same time, players' abilities are often empowered through various strengths they have chosen to take on during the character creation period or build up over time in the game. In role-playing games or first-person-shooters, players become heroic figures that are capable of defeating the enemy against the odds (with extra lives and multiple chances). "Many video games do indirectly support this norm with the amount of control they give players over the game world and their characters" (Schulzke, 2012); in Schulzke's view, this distances gameplay from "social realism." Through the embodiment of this norm in the gameplay, players are learning to accept this hegemony as a necessary component of this semiotic domain. As the term hegemony suggests, this norm is not only accepted in this domain but also operates as a guiding principle in many other semiotic domains. As domain mapping enables players to access other semiotic domains with similar beliefs and worldviews, participating in video game cultures connects the player to other cultural practices that also embody this norm, which again naturalizes and reinforces this perspective. By adopting these mechanics in school curriculum, educators further reinforce the norm.

## Playbor

Combining the word play with labor, Kücklich (2005) used the term "playbour" to describe the precarious labor that gamers voluntarily provide through leisure play. Producing cultural artifacts has become a central part of play, just as prosumers have become an identity that characterizes video game cultures. As the boundaries between work and leisure are increasingly blurred, playbor characterizes the new mode of production that relies on the disguise of labor as play, which quickens the cycle of exchange with greater productivity (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Bulut, 2013). Playbor leads to the production of mods, or add-ons to existing games. It may take the form

of user-generated avatars or community-made object models, which embodies use and exchange value among other video game players. While this leisure play is uncompensated, the game industries have capitalized and commodified their production.

While capitalizing on production from leisure is not new, the issue with playbor in video game cultures today lies in video game industries' reliance on these unpaid labors. Playbor becomes an intrinsic aspect to what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) describes as the ever-evolving capitalist Empire logic.

However, an ideology opposing the hegemonic structure is taking shape in this digital era. It is the understanding that the interactivity of networked participation through WEB 2.0 allows for democratic deliberations that undermine and subvert centralized mass media's transmission of capitalist logic (Fuchs, 2012; McChesney, 2013). Instead of becoming passive audiences whose agency is limited through one-way communication, consumers are becoming cultural producers and talking back to the hegemonic values. In video game cultures, affinity spaces that practice modding are seen as rejecting the one-way consumption model while constructing their own commodities that allow for new forms of economic exchanges. This echoes the hacker mindset in video game development that views their actions as challenging the copyright logic that shapes and cultivates capitalism.

While these practices are endangering the hegemonic model, it is equally dangerous to accept without question the idea that this act liberates us from capitalism and turns us into autonomous producers. These marginalized territories (independent producers, etc.) are being enveloped in the new immaterial labor economy and constantly being colonized by the ever-evolving global capitalist Empire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Hardt and Negri (2004) argued that current capitalism's major labor force is characterized as immaterial labors, "labour that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response" (as cited in Allen, 2011, p. 202). As the commodities produced are immaterial, it is easy to miss the relationship with capitalism and to forget that we are making, doing, or creating commodities that circulate in the existing mode of production that generates value.

In video games cultures, this immaterial labor is being harvested by the capitalist Empire through the normalization of "playbor." When players participating in affinity spaces produce mods, they are not only helping with the publicity of the original game, but also providing voluntary and free labor to generate new commodities for exchange within the video game industry. In fact, many large video game publishers have bought out successful mods and publish them under the company name. This encourages the affinity spaces to offer more immaterial labor in competition with each other to create ever better modifications in hopes of being bought out and achieving fame (Bulut, 2013). This allows the publishing houses to harvest the collective production of the network of players, which produces "far beyond the studio and the waged development team" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Players, then, are becoming immaterial laborers that participate in the continuum of productivity within the capitalist Empire without questioning their exploitation.

As was discussed earlier, video game players are learning to become active cultural participants in both the society at large and the specific video game cultures. However, considering the problematic practices in existing societies, does this mean that video game players are merely acquiring and practicing social norms and dominant ideologies? As learning is experiences that open doors for more experiences, does this mean that these experiences are only opening doors to other semiotic domains that practice these same values? Are players actually learning to become docile citizens of the existing social hierarchy?

## Towards Critical Play

Given the need for multiple learning trajectories and keeping a consideration for social reconstruction in mind, this paper ends with a discussion about further research needed regarding critical learning and critical play. If the ideal learning trajectory postulated by educational scholars is problematic in that it does not specify the cultural ideologies learned and practiced by players, it is doubtful that most players are able to achieve "critical learning," which is "learning to think of semiotic domains as design spaces that manipulate us in certain ways and that we can manipulate in certain ways" (Gee, 2007, p. 36). Affinity spaces do provide a space where players are able to organize and construct alternatives, but before we can conclude that video game cultures enable players to become active participants of society, more research needs to be done to examine the threshold of players becoming producers of this semiotic domain. At the same time, we also need to question whether prosumers may challenge the dominant ideologies and create their own cultural artifacts. How may the video game cultural practices be geared towards social reconstruction, instead of social reinforcement?

One domain to consider is the independent producers of video games. Flanagan (2009) said that critical play is "characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alter-

nates to popular play spaces" (as cited in Schulzke, 2012). When large productions of popular video game titles have become another form of mass media ideological warfare, independently developed games that often stem from user-generated content may become useful sites to analyze the possibilities of critical play. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) used the term "games of multitude" to describe games that create "new forms of subjectivity, new movement opposing global capital, and alternatives" to the existing Empire structure (pp. 187-188). If "we are interested in video games as social and cultural artifacts involved in the constitution of the player as a citizen in current societies" (Muñoz & El-Hani, 2012, p. 911), then researching and understanding players engaging in creating alternative video game cultures is essential to further our discussion.

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