Decolonizing game literacy

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Abstract

In the last decades, digital games moved from niche to mainstream: more and more people play, talk about and engage with these artefacts, becoming an important part of contemporary cultures, giving rise to the idea of game literacy, the set of skills needed to meaningfully engage with videogames. While the potentials of game literacy have, to some extent, been already discussed in the literature, we have not discussed enough the need for a game literacy that problematises the sociocultural dimensions of gaming, including the hegemonic, exclusionary rationales implicitly disseminated through mainstream gaming. In this chapter, I outline a decolonial model for game literacy, remarking how the reflection about the gaming circuits of production and dissemination should be part of any initiative that aims at dealing with critical and creative competences towards gaming, and how these are crucial for any citizen in contemporary societies.

Keywords: game literacy, videogames, decoloniality, culture.

Introduction

In the last decades, digital games moved from niche to mainstream: more and more people play, talk about, and engage with these artefacts, which are becoming an important part of contemporary culture (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). This popularization of gaming is one of the reasons behind Eric Zimmerman's (2014)

decision to define this as the "Ludic Century", arguing that digital games can help us better understand the complex world in which we live. In the "Manifesto for a Ludic Century", he calls attention to the rise of "gaming literacy". Zimmerman, however, is not the first to discuss the idea of a game literacy: since the turn of the century, different authors (Apperley & Beavis, 2013; Bourgonjon, 2014; Buckingham & Burn, 2007) identified the rise of digital games as a cultural form, outlining both their relevance in contemporary cultural landscape and the essential skills for a meaningful engagement with videogames.

There is an undeniable relationship between game and other technical literacies. Videogames, for example, depend on digital platforms (see Digital Literacy chapter) and computer code (see Coding and Computing Literacy chapter), and their circulation relies on global circuits of media production and consumption (see Media Literacy chapter). Despite these commonalities with other contemporary cultural forms, videogames are a medium per se, demanding a specific approach to better understand their role in contemporary cultures (Bourgonjon, 2014). But what one needs to be considered "game literate"? What game literacy, as a concept, consists of?

Game literacy, as any literacy (Gee, 2015), entails both "technical" and "critical" skills. The "technical" side of game literacy is closely related to "functional" competences, such as the capacity to understand the rules of a game, or to manipulate controllers to play and to progress. Besides these "functional" skills, a game literate should also have a certain level of criticality to engage with videogames (Buckingham & Burn, 2007), going beyond technical interactions to understand how games draw on and influence broader contemporary cultures. Game literacy, therefore, involves a combination of these "technical" and "critical" aspects to enable critical participation in contemporary digital cultures (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Jenkins, et al., 2009). Thus, any model of game literacy should be capable of recognizing and working with these two perspectives at once, affording both critical and conceptual understandings of how to engage and critique

gaming as a subculture, with its own conventions and expectations, and to relate gaming to broader cultural aspects.

In this context of game literacy, different research has been carried out over the last decade to explore gaming and its links to other literacies, often delving into specific practices such as game-making, modding – the modification of an existing videogame by users/players (Gee & Tran, 2016) – and participation in online and offline fan communities (Beavis, Dezuanni & O'Mara, 2017).

An important distinction to be made here is that, although there is a noticeable overlap between *game literacy studies* and *other initiatives that employ games to teach formal content,* these two approaches are, at their core, different. Game literacy is grounded not simply on the fact that games "can teach someone a skill" (Zimmerman, 2014), but also on the understanding that digital games are an important part of contemporary culture. Limiting games to a more functional role or adopting a dismissive approach that sees them as mere mindless pastimes or pedagogical tools means ignoring the different social, creative, and artistic dimensions involved in the production and consumption of these artefacts – that is, the "criticality" side of game literacy (Beavis, Dezuanni, & O'Mara, 2017; Gee & Tran, 2016).

This "criticality" side is fundamental to game – as it is to any – literacy. Criticality, in this case, is understood not as an "absolute truth", or as clarifying what is right/wrong, but as giving someone the ability to reflect about the contexts in which games are inserted, thinking about aspects such as power, voice, and difference (Andreotti, 2014). It aims at providing, through reflection and action, the means for people engaging with games to address social issues and challenge systemic inequities (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Robinson, 2020).

Nevertheless, gaming is a heavily hierarchized field, where class, gender, and race distinctions often play a significant role (Shaw, 2013; Walton & Pallitt, 2012). Therefore, when aiming for criticality within game literacy – one that explores the links between games and society – we might end up reproducing these same societal

exclusionary patterns found across mainstream gaming (and society), naturalizing certain assumptions (e.g. the average player as a White male) and practices (e.g. consider gaming in smartphones as a less "authentic" experience than console or PC gaming). We are then at risk of promoting a "non-critical", soft criticality, which focuses on "one specific type" of society, people, and games, the mainstream ones.

This issue within game literacy – the implicit perpetuation of the exclusionary nature of gaming and its links to societies – is, to some extent, related to the way gaming has been shaped both in broader culture and in academia. Until recently, most research in game studies and game literacy has been carried out in specific geographical contexts, often in the Global North. This can culminate in a narrow and homogenizing understanding of gaming practices and of game literacy, going against the aforementioned aim of addressing social issues and systemic inequities (Robinson, 2020). New research in the field of Game Studies (see Penix-Tadsen, 2019) has started to broaden this understanding of gaming to challenge the idea of a unified, massified gaming culture, decolonizing (Mignolo, 2011) gaming. In the next section, I will discuss how this movement has been developed, and how it can support a more diverse model of game literacy.

A decolonial understanding of games

This movement for decolonizing gaming is better understood through a significant shift in how we approach games and culture: if initially it was possible to identify a focus on games "as culture", now scholars tend to explore games "in culture". But how exactly can this difference help us promote a more diverse approach to gaming? What are the differences here?

Games "as culture" can be understood as specific practices related to digital games. It means, for example, knowing how to select these games – separating "awesome" from "lame" games – and how to speak about games. Games "as culture", as a perspective, looks at the culture of players, often focusing on

"gamers", who are understood here not as any videogame player, but as those who are "authorized" to speak about videogames (Shaw, 2013). It refers, in sum, to an endogenous perspective on gaming.

Games "in culture", on the other hand, is an exogenous approach to gaming. It entails understanding gaming not only as a culture in itself but as a field influential and influenced by our entire culture. It helps us to challenge simplistic approaches that might see games as inherently violent, for example, without falling into the trap of considering games as neutral, or merely positive. By adopting an approach that looks at games in culture, we acknowledge how gaming culture emerges from the circuits of production, distribution, and consumption that they are part of and have intricate relationships with individualism, consumerism, and social hierarchization through identifiers such as class or gender (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

Games "in culture" seems more productive approach for a more diverse take on digital games, since it accommodates the idea that gaming is not a monolith. A quick glimpse on gaming could give the impression that this is a unified, massified cultural, controlled by a few transnational companies whose products are consumed across the globe in a never-ending sequence of profits (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). While there is some truth to that, we cannot ignore the fact that this uniformity is partially to be blamed by the aforementioned conception of games "as culture", selectively legitimizing certain gaming practices – especially if they are promoted by a certain type of individuals, located in certain parts of the globe.

The history of digital games, for example, is often (reconstructed) focusing on particular contexts, such as Anglo-Saxon North America, Japan, or Western Europe. As an example, the "crash" of Atari in the 1980s, often pointed out as a pivotal moment for the shaping of gaming industry – which would, among other aspects, impact the naturalization of the young White male as the "normal" videogame player (Richard & Gray, 2018) – was a central moment for the US-based gaming industry, but not necessarily felt that badly in other parts of the world (see Gazzard,

2016). This metonymically-constructed relationship between central contexts and gaming as a cultural practice culminates in the normalization of certain ways of engaging with digital games, dictating which games can be played and by whom, who can talk about these games and, more disturbingly, what happens when individuals do not necessarily follow these unspoken norms, as it happened to several of the #gamergate victims (Jenson & de Castell, 2018). An approach that focus on games "as culture" – as a self-contained domain – can generate a problematic dismissive stance on the influence gaming can have on broader society: Bezio (2018), for instance, traces how the #gamergate episode has deep links to the rise of the alt-right and the current political developments in the US.

An approach that focuses on games "in culture", therefore, allows not only a more holistic view of gaming within broader societal issues, but also of how the engagement with games can be plural, with recent research delving into the variety of sociocultural experiences of diverse videogame players (Richard & Gray, 2018). Apperley (2010), for instance, remarks how, despite being seen as a global, unified culture, gaming is, in fact, constructed by several multifaceted local situations that enact, each in its own way, the global. Relying on his comparative study between gaming practices in Australia and Venezuela, Apperley (2010) discusses how differences in gaming practices across these spaces are not only the result of material or commercial constraints, but also of the (local) cultures where these gaming practices happen: who play these games and where; how games circulate and are talked about; and how these players relate these games to the rest of their lives.

Apperley's study is just one of several recent research that illustrate how gaming can be multifaceted: even if we have games that are a worldwide success, the way people play, talk and interpret these games are not necessarily the same. These investigations have worked to produce a broader view of digital games, recognizing their constitution as a global but not universal cultural practice, a consequence of several circuits both in mainstream and peripheral contexts. And my

use of the term peripheral contexts here refers not only to "parts of the world" that are often overlooked when we discuss games, such as Latin America or Africa (Penix-Tadsen, 2019), but also to how gaming is a significant part of the lives of individuals who are not the stereotypical gamers, from feminist game-making communities (Harvey, 2019) to non-white, non-male competitive gaming teams (Richard & Gray, 2018).

This "decolonizing turn" in Game Studies promotes a more inclusive view of gaming, clarifying how videogames are important part of global and local cultures (Penix-Tadsen, 2019). But what are the implications of this decolonial turn to game literacy?

A decolonial game literacy

Gaming is a practice that carries heavy cultural codes, often reliant on aspects such as consumerism and identity-based (gendered, racialized) forms of engagement. In the process of defending gaming as a valid sociocultural practice - one that is "respectable" enough to support English literacies, for instance (Beavis, Prestidge & O'Mara, 2017) – we might naturalize structural issues of gaming, alienating individuals who might not conform to what is expected from them – such as Black young women playing competitive shooting games online (Richard & Gray, 2018).

This "alienation issue" is also found in discussions around literacy studies. Walton and Pallitt (2012), for instance, rely on their study of South African youth to discuss whether game literacy, as a concept in itself, is productive. They argue that "the normative implications of the term literacy are likely to encourage a bias in favor of hegemonic versions of digital gaming, which are often inflected by a particular White male technicity" (Walton & Pallitt, 2012, p.358), favoring, for example, middle class practices such as modding (Hong, 2013) in detriment of other, such as tandem play (Consalvo et al., 2018) – the act of collectively playing a single-

player game by taking turns through control-swapping, a common practice in Global South spaces (see Apperley, 2010).

This selective approach to what "counts" and what does not "count" as game literacy is known in different educational spaces, from more traditional forms of literacy in formal education as discussed by Gee (2015) – e.g. how working class (big D) Discourse is not recognized by schools – to more recent instances of informal learning spaces, such as the rhetoric around the maker movement (Vossoughi et al., 2016), traditionally favoring activities such as robotics – seen as masculine and "geeky", therefore, "normal" – in detriment of ones culturally-coded as feminine or old (therefore, "abnormal"), like sewing (Kafai et al., 2014). This, in turn, bears a heavy influence in what is meant by "criticality" in game literacy, favoring a "soft" (Andreotti, 2014) taking the mainstream as the norm rather than eschewing systemic inequities and addressing social issues.

Another possible barrier to the development of this criticality in game literacy-based initiatives is overplaying the importance of technical equipment while downplaying the differences of interest and uses of this equipment. Walton and Pallitt (2012) remark how differences in economic power and access to technology/equipment play a significant role in the kinds of engagement different people have and how they perceive themselves in relation to digital games. How we address this gap, however, becomes the crucial issue, especially when working with communities seen as marginalized or outsiders to the stereotypical gamer image. There is a risk in adopting a "deficit-based" model, aiming to "normalize" everyone's relationships with gaming mostly by "equalizing" access to equipment and promoting the same practices across different contexts without taking into account participants' subjectivities and cultural positionings. While access is indeed a critical issue in gaming, such approach does not necessarily address the roots of this gap, reproducing social hierarchies and class distinctions within gaming.

Reducing this gaming gap across different communities to a question of access to materials means ignoring how voices are differently heard in gaming. It

means subscribing to neoliberal ideals such as individualism or meritocracy so exploited in games, both in gameplay and through the commercial relationships promoted by the industry (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). More alarmingly, this reductionist approach – this "soft" approach to criticality in game literacy – can reproduce hegemonic ideals through epistemic violence (Andreotti, 2014), as if there were "correct" and "incorrect" ways of engaging (e.g. specific technology/equipment) with videogames. But how can we avoid this reductionism? How to work towards a decolonial game literacy?

Final Thoughts

Not surprisingly, the way to avoid a reductionist approach to game literacy depends on a broader understanding of videogames and gaming. This entails acknowledging that games are not simply means to "more noble" ends: even if games can support the development of other literacies, from language skills to programming abilities, game literacy should not be confined to a second-tier role within the constellation of different literacies. Videogames are important part of contemporary culture, with their ties and mutual influence becoming more and more evident, with the aforementioned rise of alt-right (Bezio, 2018) or the erosion and fight for workers' right (Woodcock, 2020) in the digital age being firstly rehearsed in gaming circuits. Adopting a cynical stance that sees games and gaming as "minor" and/or separate from contemporary life only legitimizes the hegemonical exclusionary practices that maintain games as "boy's toys" (Harvey, 2019) in the public imaginary. But how to overcome these hegemonical practices? How to broaden our understanding about games and game literacy?

A broader approach to game literacy depends on leaving behind earlier celebratory perspectives of gaming aligned to the "rhetoric of progress" (Walton & Pallitt, 2012), as if games were inherently transformative and positive. It means recognizing the importance of the different ways gaming can happen, and value

these different kinds of engagement as relevant and important to the field. It means acknowledging that a narrow understanding of game literacy, which favors only a few selected practices – often carrying specific classist connotations – only reproduces the same excluding structures found in normative gaming and does not lend to a sought-after level of criticality. It means giving participants in gaming the ability to engage with notions of power to develop a critical understanding of the field with which they are engaging and to counterargument these forces both through discourse and action, including here the capacity of producing authorial games (Dahya et al., 2017).

Part of our role as educators interested in equity is to lay bare the power dynamics in the field and give individuals the ability to critically question them through participation (Jenkins et al., 2009). Why non-male players are harassed in online play sessions? Why most female avatars – virtual characters – are hypersexualized? Why are there so few people of color working in games? Helping individuals to navigate questions such as these, not offering a definitive truth, but the ability to think by themselves and finding their own answers should be one of the main goals of game – and, arguably, any – literacy.

While helping individuals to join the lucrative gaming industry should be within the horizons of game literacy initiatives, this should not necessarily be its main goal (Dahya et al., 2017). Game literacy should not be about producing an army of e-athletes and/or game designers as cheap labor for the industry, but to promote a more critical take on gaming, recognizing and disseminating its diversity and connecting formal and informal learning experience through critique, reflection and design (Apperley & Beavis, 2013). But how a decolonized game literacy should work? How can we achieve it?

To decolonize game literacy, we then must respect different experiences and different forms of knowledge, always asking "what kind of knowledge, by whom, what for?" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 183). In a game literacy initiative, this would mean showing how gaming is not a practice for a few, but one where everyone can take

part. It means promoting a dialogical approach, where participants (Jenkins et al., 2009) do not feel obliged to subscribe to specific Discourses (Gee, 2015), but can make use of their own understandings to appropriate games as a cultural form, accommodating different levels of affiliation, interests and finalities. The main objective of game literacy should be promoting a more inclusive perspective of digital games, one that is equally open to everyone and not exclusive to a male Global North society or "gamers" (Jenson & de Castell, 2018). If games are a pathway to understand out contemporary societies (Zimmerman, 2014), eschewing the normalized assumptions within gaming becomes a significant critical exercise to eschew the systematic exclusionary values around us, leading towards important steps for more equitable and socially just societies.

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