Digital game literacies and school learning: A sociocultural perspective

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ABSTRACT

This is the first paper in a three-part series which examines digital game literacies and school learning. This paper (Part 1) argues that conceptualizing digital game literacies within sociocultural approaches to literacy provides educators with ways of thinking about digital games and learning that move beyond the hype often associated with new digital technologies in education. I begin by exploring how sociocultural approaches to literacy provide a useful foundation for rethinking how digital games are deployed within the social and cultural contexts of schools. I then analyze evolving definitions of digital game literacies, before demonstrating why bridging these practices with school learning does not always produce the outcomes teachers and researchers might wish for. This paper offers a foundation for moving beyond discourses of digital game based learning that privilege the medium and instead focuses more closely on what teachers and students do with these technologies within the disciplinary constraints of formal schooling.

KEY POINTS

Background: Claims that digital games will save education have long emphasized features of the medium to support their arguments.

Aim: This paper aims to demonstrate the benefits of a sociocultural approach to digital game literacies.

Methods: I analyse literature associated with digital game literacies, as well as findings from case studies, to demonstrate the value of going beyond the medium and instead privileging game-related literacy practices.

Results: The medium is not enough. It is only when digital games are positioned within social and cultural contexts that we can fully understand how they might contribute to school learning.

Conclusion: The learning that might emerge from the inclusion of digital games into school-based curricula will require teachers and educators to carefully consider how digital game literacies can bridge the gap with the disciplinary school literacies that dominate schooling.

TWEET

Digital games won't save education, but digital game literacies, conceived from a sociocultural perspective, offer a good starting point for rethinking how gameplay might contribute to school learning.

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Introduction to series

This is the first paper in a three-part series which examines digital game literacies and school learning. Part 1 in the series explores the concept of digital game literacies and explains why a sociocultural approach to these literacies is essential for educators seeking to work with digital games. Part 2 explores the challenge of designing a digital game curriculum. Drawing on accounts from four experienced teachers, it engages with the myriad of challenges that can interfere with the best-laid plans that involve digital games and school-learning, recognising that while technical factors can disrupt learning, issues of pedagogy and attitude are far more significant. The final part introduces a case study of a school that replaced traditional print-based texts with a digital game, highlighting how the introduction of games into school learning does not always produce the outcomes that are intended.

Introduction

We should not be surprised that the use of digital games to support learning in schools has exploded (Clark et al, 2016). However, despite their success in guiding gamers to complete a wide range of in-game achievements, research investigating what happens when digital games are leveraged as tools in support of school-learning has produced mixed results (Girard et al., 2013). Digital games are not the panacea to all of the challenges of education that many have wished they could be, and as deHaan (2020) reminds us, we should be wary of the "hype cycle" (p.143), where the attention of game-based language teaching researchers "flits from tech to tech, never pausing to consider how fundamental pedagogical integration work might meaningfully change the game." What I want to suggest in this article is that one of the obstacles to achieving the kinds of learning characterised by Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) relates not to issues of bandwidth, cost, compatibility or even game design, but rather something much simpler that requires moving our thinking from games as a medium to the social and cultural activities that accompany gameplay.

From literacy to digital game literacies

Discourses that seek to explore how learning can be mediated through digital games are inextricably tied to beliefs and practices associated with literacy and literacy education (Beavis, O'Mara, & McNeice, 2012; Garcia, Dail, & Witte, 2020). Revisiting different positions regarding literacy/ies offers one way to understand the productive potential of a socioculturally orientated approach to digital game literacies. In other words, how we think about literacy will impact how we implement a game-informed curriculum.

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Literacy refers to much more than a set of discrete skills that learners acquire in a range of formal learning contexts (primary school, high school, higher education), and which are usually limited to reading, writing, and to a lesser degree, speaking and listening. Gee (1996) argues that such approaches see literacy as a tool for civilizing individuals and predominantly developed, or gifted, students through schooling. This way of thinking sees literacy attainment as a pathway to higher-order cognitive abilities. This narrow way of thinking about literacy has a long history (see Newbolt, 1924 for an account of literacy as skills), and as I have explored elsewhere (Bacalja, 2021a), through an empirical analysis of 14 industry reports on skills and schooling, it continues to exert influence over educational policy and practice. For a more detailed exploration of the limitations of skills-based approaches to defining literacy see Freebody, 1998; Gee, 2001; Luke, 2004.

There is another way of thinking about literacy and learning that goes beyond narrowly defined discrete skills; the situated sociocultural approach. As the name implies, the situated sociocultural approach to literacies provides a greater emphasis on the social and cultural circumstances in which individuals live and learn (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). Rather than literacy being measured solely by performance on decontextualised activities, for example, achievement on an examination used as a

measure of a learner's knowledge and understanding, a sociocultural approach privileges how well an individual can participate meaningfully in authentic contexts, which could be inside or outside of schools. For example, learners might demonstrate their understanding and skills relating to print media through immersion in the process of producing a local newspaper. This thinking moves us beyond activity that occurs solely in schools and towards meaningful participation as a precondition for engagement in all aspects of social life. The learning associated with literacy practices is not limited to formal schooling. The knowledge acquisition that accompanies socially situated engagement in a community does not require formal assessment, or even trained teachers. When we are shopping, having dinner with friends, attending a wedding, or gaming online, we are always engaged in literacy practices that are precisely, albeit often unconsciously, selected for use. Put differently, we are always engaging a wide range of (literacies) practices to negotiate our lives, and simultaneously, as we move through the world, we learn about and through the (literacies) practices we will need to negotiate our worlds. This is why we must shift from literacy in the singular, to literacies in the plural, and why we must always locate such practices within specific social and cultural situations. An example might be useful at this stage.

Imagine a community gardening club that meets once a fortnight and involves a group of people working to improve public vegetation. The activities these individuals engage in when they meet are social in that they involve people coming together and interacting in-person, but also social in terms of prior experiences with other people that have shaped what they think and know about gardening and the gardening club. Their activity is also cultural as what they do when they meet each fortnight is tied to knowledge about the world (or more precisely, knowledge about one specific aspect of the world). This could include knowledge about gardening, but also beliefs about more abstract knowledge, like community, the environment and volunteerism. In order to be a functioning member of the group, one must possess, and use, this knowledge to engage in the kinds of literacy practices that are expected of this community group. This would include ways of interacting with others (speaking and listening), using the right kinds of language (vocabulary), and translating knowledge about plants and the environment into actions. Successful participation is not measured by how well each attendee performed on their high school exam, or through a multiple-choice quiz at the end of each fortnightly gathering. Rather, success is determined by how well each individual can activate literacy practices that are socially and culturally relevant. If we wanted to understand the different ways that members of this community participate meaningfully, a study of shovels, spades and watering cans is not likely to be of assistance. Instead, a sociocultural approach that maps the literacy practices of the group and those of individuals within the group would be more beneficial.

To say that all digital game literacies are social is to recognise that the things we do in this world are always connected to other people. Sometimes these connections are geographically close, for example, when two young people are sitting in a computer lab playing a game against each other. Sometimes these connections are geographically distant, for example the distance between the person who designed the game and the person playing the game. This social component also extends to all of the people we have interacted with over our lifetimes, each of which leaves their mark in ways that inform who we are and what we will do. To adopt a more socially oriented approach to digital game literacies in the context of schooling is to be sensitive to the social activity that enables and constrains learning with and through digital games. This means being attentive to the social relationships of those inside of the classrooms, inside of schools and outside of these contexts, and the effects of these relations on learning.

To say that all digital game literacies are cultural is to draw attention to the knowledge, beliefs and ideologies that pervade all social situations involving gaming. Digital games have their own cultural knowledge built into them. Sometimes this is knowledge about virtual characters, weapons, gameworlds, or even how to use a controller. Digital games engage us in cultural exchange by bringing knowledge to us, but we also bring cultural knowledge to games. Our prior experience and current desires come with us to our gaming practices. And, just to complicate matters further, once we enter online multiplayer worlds, we must also navigate the culture that other players bring with them. To adopt a more culturally oriented approach to digital games literacies in the context of schooling is to be cognisant of, and responsive to, the knowledge learners bring to such contexts, and the knowledge that is to be cultivated in formal learning spaces. For example, the use of digital games in the Physics classroom would involve a cultural exchange between the knowledge within the game (how to operate

the controller, what to do with an avatar, the physics concept embedded into the game) and knowledge about the discipline of physics and school learning (formulae, turn-taking, assessment).

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To talk about sociocultural literacies as situated is to recognise that the context matters greatly. We should be wary of identifying and trying to analyse the social and cultural aspects of digital game literacies without making strong connections to the contexts from which these literacies emerge. This is because activity in the world only ever makes sense when it is considered in terms of its relationship to the context from which that activity has emerged. If I were to observe a young person playing a city-builder game, I might conclude that they have learnt a great deal of knowledge about transportation systems and telecommunications networks. However, that learning only really makes sense in the context of what the game requires of the player. That same person would likely struggle to convert that game knowledge into the construction of real-world infrastructure. Likewise, a young person might be observed to be highly social in their online gaming with friends and strangers when playing the football video game *FIFA'22* but simultaneously very quiet when engaged in physical activity classes at school. Contexts matter and as I will demonstrate later in this paper, there is much educators can gain from the use of digital games in formal learning contexts by considering the relationship between specific digital game literacies and how they might support contextually appropriate learning objectives.

The importance of considering the situatedness of all digital game literacy practices can be highlighted through my experience with one gaming community. The Forts Community represents a group of people who play the game *Forts* (EarthWork Games, 2017). *Forts* is a physics-based Real Time Strategy game where foes design and build custom bases, and use these bases to try and destroy the opposition's base. About once a month members of this group meet to compete in tournaments that are live streamed across a number of platforms (YouTube, Twitch, etc). These are a product of, and a facilitator of, social and cultural digital game literacy practices. Which is to say that the literacy practices which can be observed at each event are informed by all previous events. But each event is also a producer of future social and cultural exchanges. Gameplay literacies mediated through social activity are central to the practices of this group. Members play, either individually, or in groups of up to four players, against other members of the *Forts* community. While the enormous geographic and cultural distance between players from around the world might suggest social distance, the play is communal and even intimate. Teams communicate with each other via microphones and type into the in-game chat as they play. Teams also rehearse together before the tournament. Sociality is further evident in the live-streaming of these tournaments whereby several well-known game-streamers commentate on the games in real-time, incorporating comments from viewers into the stream. Making sense of the social interactions between members of this community is facilitated through an attention to the particularities of the situation. Put simply, the things (literacy practices) that members of this community 'do' in these tournaments are informed by their relations with other players.

Digital game literacies throughout the tournaments are also informed by cultural activity. To play *Forts*, one needs a certain amount of knowledge about how the game works, and how tournaments work. This cultural knowledge is usually the product of hundreds, if not, thousands of hours of play and training, often involving coaching and reflective practice. These tournaments also involve a degree of cultural expectations. Approximately 25 tournaments had taken place prior to 2022. Each contributes to establishing expected norms around how players behave during the tournaments. How one plays the game and communicates with team-mates is a product of the cultural beliefs and practices that people bring to their play.

So, when we say that all literacies, including digital game literacies, are socially and culturally situated, we are recognising the social and cultural contexts that always inform what we do in the world. We are also highlighting the difficulty with generalising the productive capacity of that literacy practice when it is deployed in other social and cultural contexts. Just because a team is the world-champion at *Forts* doesn't mean they will have success with other games. Just because a player can communicate

effectively with their team-mates, doesn't mean they can communicate effectively with their family. And just because they know a lot about how to behave in a gaming tournament, does not mean they know how to behave in other social contexts.

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Characterising digital game literacies

Differences in attempts to define what is meant by digital game literacies reveal the complexity of trying to capture the social and cultural dynamics of game play. Take, for example, efforts to define game literacies. Zimmerman (2009) states that:

> Gaming literacy is an approach to literacy based on game design. My argument is that there is an emerging set of skills and competencies, a set of new ideas and practices that are going to be increasingly a part of what it means to be literate in the coming century (p.23).

In a similar vein, Zagal (2008) writes that games literacy is:

> Having the ability to play games. Having the ability to understand meanings with respect to games. Having the ability to make games (p.2).

These two definitions are similar in that they both refer to skills and competencies. Zimmerman makes a connection to the value of these capabilities for the future, which implies that such skills are transferable across domains and contexts. Zagal's definition is closely correlated with traditional approaches to literacy, where the emphasis is on some kind of skill needed to negotiate or master a particular medium. They also both make reference to abilities or competencies that contribute to comprehension, or meaning-making, albeit with no reference to the role that context has in informing game understandings.

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In contrast, Salen's (2007) definition highlights the dynamic relationship between games and game literacies by drawing attention to how people use games to get things done in the world. As she states,

> I intentionally use the term gaming literacies and not game literacies as my interest is not simply in how digital games work (formally, socially, culturally, ideologically) but in how they support a performative and often transgressive learning stance based in play, which in turn, owes much of its specific character to the status of games as dynamic, rule-based systems (p.307)

Salen's references to the performative nature of digital game literacies suggests that such practices serve specific purposes in the world, they are 'performed' by individuals, for others in the social world.

Interestingly, Buckingham and Burn's (2007) definition brings us the closest to something that centers the social nature of digital game literacies and the importance of considering the cultural contexts in which these practices occur. Buckingham and Burn argue that game literacy is about:

> Understanding how the social activity of play is defined and carried out, and how players are socially located; and this then leads into broader questions about how social relations and identities themselves are constructed…acknowledging the ways in which the activity of gaming is part of the texture of people's daily lives and social relationships (p.328)

There is an emphasis on the players and their individual circumstances. There is also a reference to the value that gaming (a practice in the world), not games (objects), has for people as they go about their lives. As Buckingham and Burn elaborate, "any analysis of game literacy needs to take account of the social dimensions of gaming and not merely the textual or formal aspects of games per se" (p.328). Thus, the approach to digital game literacies that is taken across this series of papers is one that emphasizes the social and cultural situatedness of gameplay. Such an approach has implications for those wishing to leverage practices popularised outside of schooling for the purposes of more formal learning objectives inside classrooms.

Bringing digital game literacies and school literacies together

As numerous papers have explored (All et al., 2015; All et al., 2016; Perrotta et al., 2013), establishing how digital games can be used effectively to add value to traditional teaching and learning is extraordinarily complex. Given that the use of digital games in any formal learning context will always be susceptible to irreconcilable variables at the local level that cannot be moderated or managed in the way they are in experimental design methods, we might question whether it is even useful to pursue quantifiable measures of effectiveness. Aguilera & de Roock (2022) argue that any potential to use digital games for learning cannot escape the real-world realities of such use. One feature of such realities that I want to address briefly here relates to disciplinary school literacies. Understanding the differences between digital game literacy practices outside of schooling and the types of literacy practices that represent disciplinary mastery might help us appreciate why the results of DGBL can be so variable (Clark et al., 2016; Young et al., 2012).

The organisation of school learning, especially secondary school learning, into disciplines contributes to the (re)production of disciplinary literacies making it difficult to extrapolate that the digital games literacies that produce learning in out of school contexts can always be drawn on for distinction in school contexts. What it takes to be a successful learner in Science is quite different to what it means to be a successful student in Mathematics. And it is not just the types of knowledge that are different. The forms of conceptual thinking, the types of writing, the reading comprehension, and even the forms of interacting, all differ. These differences are also influenced by the societal factors that carry their own influences. This is part of what makes school-based learning so challenging; the specialisation of disciplinary literacies that a student is expected to master (Billman & Pearson, 2013; Green, 2012). As Green (1988) has explored, in the earlier years of schooling there tends to be an explicit emphasis on language learning, with an implicit and informal interest in cultural learning. As students move through the school, the situation is gradually reversed. An interest in the specific knowledges and practices of individual subject-areas produces a greater emphasis on cultural learning, at the expense of language learning. Given each subject area generates and sustains its own meaning-systems, and that knowledge is socially constructed within these systems, there is an imperative to ensure that as teachers plan for teaching, they consider how they will support activity that enables enculturation and socialisation into what are arbitrary communities of practice often treated as if they are natural and accessible to all.

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I highlight the significance of school literacies for school learning in order to emphasise the risk of assuming that the learning associated with digital game literacies outside of school can easily be bridged into the classroom. Put another way, a sociocultural approach to digital game literacies requires that we are cautious of universalising claims which evolve out of theoretical accounts of learning with and through games (see Gee, 2003; Squire, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2008). When digital play enters the classroom it clashes with other phenomena associated with schools, curriculum, pedagogy, rules, control, power, language, etc, (see Bacalja, 2020, 2021b; Bacalja & Clark, 2021, for examples). Teachers must decide what they want to do with play. Will they allow students to play as they wish, without interruptions? Or will play be controlled, tied to other literacy practices like reading comprehension questions and tests? Current school-based disciplinary structures will not always be conducive to the kind of playful gaming practices that many students engage in outside of school settings.

Ultimately, if digital games are to be educational technologies that facilitate learning then we need teachers to be knowledgeable about both digital game literacies and school literacies. Hanghoj et al (2018) makes this point in their work exploring game-oriented learning in school domains. They say that: "if we wish to understand game-oriented learning, we cannot simply reduce the phenomenon to questions of game design, as learning always involves negotiation and meaning-making processes between the involved participants" (p. 29). As the authors go on to argue, domains of school learning that center digital games for learning inevitably end up bringing together an interplay of (literacy) practices across in- and out-of-school domains. deHaan (2019) has captured the diversity of digital game literacy practices that can support learning in a project that saw a game-based learning curriculum combined with L2 language teaching. Learners in the project reportedly:

- Played games, read reviews, watched videos ("experiencing")
- Discussed games and reviews and videos, uncovered concepts, read academic articles and wrote an essay ("conceptualizing")
- Examined games and texts, and gathered data in society ("analyzing"), and
- Posted a review and discussed games on a gamer website ("applying") (p. 8)

McFadyen's (2020) account of bringing games into their media and technology class similarly captures the diversity of digital game literacies that are possible for those interested in DGBL. These included: making podcasts and video games, creating gameplay videos, discussions about recording processes, starting a lunchtime game club which encouraged social play, hosting gaming tournaments, conversations about language use during play, and structured learning about game-related topics such as screen time and non-toxic gaming behaviour.

What emerges from these case studies are examples of digital game literacies that support learning, and a sensitivity to the contexts and pedagogies in which digital games are to be deployed. As York, Poole, and deHaan (2021) have established, too often studies seeking to demonstrate the benefits of digital games for learning are short on details regarding pedagogical underpinnings, scaffolds, and techniques used by teachers to integrate games and play in their contexts. Practices that involve talking through, writing about, playing with and reading around digital games can support the imperatives of discipline-specific learning. If the medium is not enough, then detailed accounts of digital games and their design will only ever be partially useful for educators. What must follow instead is a nuanced focus in research invoking DGBL on the nexus between digital game literacies, discipline specific practices, and pedagogy.

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Conclusion

This paper has been the first in a three part series available in Ludic Language Pedagogy focused on digital game literacies and school learning. It aims to demonstrate how a sociocultural approach to digital game literacies can support educators wishing to work with these cultural objects for the purpose of school learning. Such an approach requires thinking beyond digital games as objects, or an over-reliance on the design features of individual games, and to encourage those interested in using digital games in their classrooms to consider the characteristics of the desired subject-specific learning and the role that digital game literacies might play in reaching this learning. In the next part, I will introduce readers to specific digital game literacies that are being used by educators and researchers interested in school-based digital game informed learning. If we are to extend our thinking beyond games as objects, then we will benefit from observing the social and cultural activity that accompanies that use of games for learning.

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