Keynote: Supporting Teachers on Their Ludic Journey

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DOI:https://doi.org/10.55853/CP1_1

Much has been written in research about digital games as powerful learning tools (Gee, 2003; Bogost, 2007; Shaffer, 2006; Kafai & Burke, 2015), but far less attention has been given to the people who make those learning experiences possible: the teachers. In the Digital Games-based Learning (DGBL) literature, teachers and their ' practice-based use of digital games have been underrepresented. Inspired by Hattie's (2003) meta-analysis, which found that teacher effectiveness has a far greater impact on learning than games, in my previous research, I focused on how teachers engage with, resist, or adopt digital games in their practice. My research began with a simple question: If teachers are central to student learning, why are they so often peripheral in DGBL research?

Sweden, where my research is based, offers a relevant context: while the national curriculum prescribes broad learning goals, teachers and schools have substantial autonomy in choosing materials and pedagogical approaches. In this environment, however, digital tools have often been introduced through a "push-driven" logic (Player-Koro, 2012), where external visions of innovation have been promoted without always aligning with teachers' needs or realities. Such discourse fails to acknowledge the struggles of technology use in schools, with a common conclusion that schools do not live up to expectations because teachers lack interest or skills. In DGBL, this discourse is described as the teacher deficit model, which claims that teachers have problematic attitudes and thus do not implement games in effective ways (Linderoth & Sjöblom, 2019). To better understand the landscape, I used Activity Theory (AT) (Engeström & Sannino, 2021) to analyze how teachers engage with DGBL. AT is a systems-oriented framework that helps to explore how tools, rules, community, and division of labor shape an activity. It is particularly suited to examining the tensions that arise when innovative tools meet established routines.

In my talk, I draw on results from previous studies described in "Mapping the Landscape of Digital Games-Based Learning in Swedish Compulsory and Upper Secondary Schools (Mathe M. , 2020). The studies investigate how teachers across subject areas approach teaching with games based on interviews and a survey of 181 teachers in Sweden. Today, I would like to present three illustrative cases grounded in patterns from that dataset that reflect distinct trajectories of teachers engaging with games.

The first case is that of Astrid, an experienced teacher interested in digital games. She sees pedagogical potential, particularly in games that deal with social issues, but has not yet used them in her teaching. Her reasons are not about lack of will or negative attitudes; she is eager to learn more. But she expressed a need for more practical knowledge, clearer pedagogical approaches, and opportunities to exchange ideas with colleagues. If teaching with games were a game itself, Astrid would be at the starting line, interested and attentive, but still holding back from pressing "start." Astrid's position, thus, can be described not as resistance but as a cautious standpoint. Her case reflects the cluster described in the study as "non-game-using teachers"—those who have not implemented games in their practice, but express openness toward future use. These teachers are interested and see the potential of games for learning, yet may lack the personal experience, confidence, tools, or structural support. In AT terms, this reflects tension between the object (pedagogical innovation) and the available mediating tools, and community structures.

Johanna's case reflects the "skeptics" cluster identified in the study; teachers who have experimented with digital games but discontinued their use after encountering limitations or questioning their pedagogical value. Johanna teaches in a secondary school, where she introduced her class to a series of short educational digital games tied to curriculum content. The games have been delivered via a platform incorporating leaderboards and tracking students' play progress. Her initial motivation was to boost student engagement with the subject matter and encourage practice through digital games. While the games seemed promising initially, she noticed a gradual decline in student interest. Assigning games as homework did not yield the outcomes she hoped for, and eventually, she phased the games out of her teaching. If we continue the game metaphor, Johanna played a few levels of a bad game, which she then quit due to a lack of perceived payoff. From an AT perspective, her experience points to a breakdown between the object of pedagogical innovation and the effectiveness of the mediating artifact—the games themselves.

Jonas represents the "advanced adopters" cluster from the study: teachers who have integrated games but face barriers in sustaining or scaling these efforts. Jonas, an English teacher, brought a commercially available narrative game into his classroom for English literacy development. Collaborating with colleagues in Norway and Canada, he ran a five-week project where students analyzed the game alongside other texts, explored and analyzed thematic strands (like music, character, and setting), worked in international project groups, and interviewed the game developers. His project was ambitious, well-received, and pedagogically rich. But it came at a cost. Jonas coordinated the licensing, purchasing, and lesson design, which often required him to

use his time and resources. While the project succeeded on pedagogical terms, he expressed hesitation about repeating it in the same form, due to the high level of preparation and resources it required. AT helps make sense of these tensions: in his case, the object of pedagogical innovation clashed with a lack of community structures and resources.

Across these three cases, and in the broader survey data, a key theme emerges: teachers are not passive adopters or resistors of technology. They are thoughtful practitioners navigating complex educational systems. Their use of games in teaching is shaped not only by personal beliefs but by the institutional structures, resources, and discourses that surround them. Activity Theory allows us to move beyond simple explanations like "teacher resistance" or "innovation gaps." Instead, it invites us to examine the misalignments between different components of the games-based learning activity system: the goals teachers have, the rules they must follow, the communities they belong to, and the tools and resources they can access.

While these cases are not subject-specific, the tensions they reveal are relevant across disciplines. Language educators may recognize similar tensions in navigating institutional constraints while striving to create playful, meaningful learning experiences. These insights offer a broader understanding of how teacher agency and systemic support shape the viability of game-based teaching in varied educational contexts.

The cases highlight that teachers interact with games along multiple trajectories: some are cautiously interested, some may turn skeptical, and some are highly invested but constrained. Teachers´ trajectories are shaped by more than their individual preferences; they reflect systemic conditions. Activity Theory can help analyze and make sense of the systemic tensions. Rather than focusing on attitudes or competencies alone, it helps to shift attention to the structural alignments that make playful pedagogy possible. Finally, it reminds us that in any discussion about games in education, we must include the voices of teachers not just as implementers, but as co-designers, critics, and agents of change.

As researchers, we must ask, how can we better meet teachers where they are, providing support that acknowledges their unique challenges? And while much of the current research focuses on digital games, what might we gain by broadening our perspective to include the full spectrum of ludic learning.