

UTILIZING VIDEOGAMES TO SHAPE GOOD SOCIAL MEMBERS: A CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Videogames have been considered to be one reason behind the increasing violence in today's life. However, considering that they seem to be an inseparable part of the young generation's life and that as a form of popular culture they are a site of contestation between the dominant and subordinate cultures, this paper would like to dig out how videogames can be manipulated as a medium to create good social members. To reach the objective, critical media literacy would be utilized because it enables viewers and learners to independently question exposed information in the dominating media culture at present; thus to be critical users of a popular culture product.

Keywords: video games, critical media literacy, power and information, ideology

Introduction

I am not a gamer although I sometimes play snoods or bubbles and ballistic. This maybe the reason why I feel very much concerned knowing most games teenage students today love to play: *Assassin Creed*, *Point Blank*, *Resident Evil*, *God of War*, *Grand Theft Auto*, to mention some. These games share one thing in common: violence. Later published games, such as *Farcry 3*, which is actually not the most recently-published one, expose young gamers not only to violence and cruelty, but also nudity. If 2D games do not visualize the act of hurting and killing as real ones, the invention of 3D technology enables the portrayal of seemingly real characters and actions in a makeshift world, making the games better resemble events in real life. What is more alarming is these young game players do not just sit passively and watch. They actively take part in the violent acts of shooting, maiming, killing by acting as one of the characters. The better they are at these, the higher their scores; and thus, fun, success, pride, popularity and peer admiration are earned as if they had just done a heroic act. As Grossman quoted by Olfman (2003 cited in Imre, 2009) argued, videogames associates violence with pleasure.

Is it surprising if they transfer such behavior into the real world? Leo (2011) questioned whether "all this constant training in make-believe killing has no social effects", juxtaposing a similarity between Dylan Klebold and Erick Harris', the actors in the Colorado massacre, actions and those in the game *Postal*, and then related it to the fact that most youngsters are addicted to games in which "hurting and maiming is the central fun activity". APU's, an Indonesian high school student, confession to the Education and Culture Minister Muhammad Nuh that he felt satisfied after stabbing Deni Januar, a vocational school student, to death in a student brawl in South Jakarta in 2012 may lead us to the same question Leo expressed. Despite the more serious actions the Indonesian government has taken in dealing

with violent student brawls, another student's life was taken in a similar event last October 2013 ("Student Killed..." Oct. 2013).

The aforementioned is not the only negative effect of videogames. The "less alarming yet similarly serious ones" include worry that it creates "isolated, cyborg identities" and that it is a tool for big media corporation to control youngsters' imagination (Imre, 2009, p.24). Quoting scholars, Imre mentioned computer gaming as the reason for the increasing psychological disorder, such as autism, hyperactivity, distractibility, among children. Armstrong (2003 as cited in Imre, 2009) observed that videogames does not facilitates imagination, language development and social interaction. The list seems exhaustive that there is a worry that "the next generation may not privilege reality over virtual reality and human intellectual over machine intellectual" (Olfman cited in Imre, 2009, pp.27-28).

The problem lies in the fact that video games are inseparable from the youngsters' life and that violence is a part of many of these make-believe worlds. There seem to be no other ways than to make the best out of the worst. This is certainly possible since videogames are not all negative. As Gee (2003), Joshnson (2005) and Prensky (2001, 2006) cited in Sanford and Madill (2007, p.433) state, the play and creation of video games facilitate important and powerful learning. Gee (2003 cited in Imre, 2009, p.31) elaborates that video games are an effective means of resisting the present tendency which favors standardized tests. Gee adds that many games, even the violent ones, require gamers to think critically. I agree with Gee's relating videogames to critical thinking because gamers should predict, infer, analyze and evaluate their rival or enemy's movements and gestures before they make a move themselves. In analyzing, predicting and making inferences, they also need to relate complex information. Gee even argues that gamer students will acquire a sense of social justice and develop their social learning skill by participating in affinity group connected through video games (cited in Imre, 2009, p. 31).

However, Imre (2009) argued that Gee purposefully avoid discussing the problematic content of videogames, such as violence and gender bias. I agree with Imre, considering that videogames consist of language both verbal and non-verbal, pictures, technical elements such as movement, color and lightning, and issue or content. As a teacher, I would like to address this problem from the perspective of an educator. I agree with Birch's (2009, p.3) statements that education is not "politically or socially neutral" (See also Giroux, 2001 cited in Garcia, Seglem, and Share, 2013), and that teaching can be utilized to "transform or maintain the status quo" (3-4). I also share Storey's belief that text is never neutral (5) but both text and readers are shaped by a social, political and material context (Ashley 136). In other words, texts, or videogames in this study, put the youngsters in the position of passive recipients or objects of a larger ideological dialog underlying game making. Therefore, this study attempts to address this neglected area and investigate ways to make use of the negative qualities of videogames and transform them into positive forces which empower the youth to be good social members. To facilitate such awareness, it is urgent that the youngsters be made media literate.

Critical Media Literacy

Regardless the aforementioned problem, media education is urgently required. First, today's life cannot be separated from the role of media, both print and non-print, and that non-print media, in the forms of electronic gadgets and popular culture, is even taking an increasingly bigger role. Second, media culture disseminates knowledge of the world, and values, including proper--improper behavior and gender roles (Kellner & Share, 2005). Finally, because young people are technology savvy, they are exposed to media-construction of thoughts, values, fantasy, culture and the world ("Introduction to Media Literacy", p. 2).

These youngsters may not be aware of media-construction of the world since it is usually done in an invisible and unconscious way (Kellner and Share, 2005). The need for media education is even more urgent when young people are exposed to time-based media, such as video games. Unlike reading static-media in the forms of newspapers, e-book or website, in which readers may stop and think or re-read some parts to integrate the information rationally, the images and information in time-based media often “bypass the analytic brain and trigger emotions and memory in the unconscious and reactive parts of the brain”. (“Introduction to Media Literacy”, p. 2).

Kellner and Share (2007) introduce four different approaches to media education. The first is the protectionist. This approach believes that audiences are passive victims of media so that they need to be protected. Because of its worry of media, it favors traditional print media over media culture. Media arts education believes that audience should learn to value media and arts due to their aesthetic values. This approach encourages students to express themselves through media and art creation. The strength of this approach lies in its facilitating an experience to voice what students have in mind and is particularly beneficial for the marginalized. However, there is a danger that what is voiced is personal one instead of notions that have gone through sufficient social analysis. The third approach Kellner and Share (2007) suggest is media literacy approach. It is defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages of all kinds” (“Introduction to Media Literacy, p.1). Hence, it expands literacy to include multiple forms of media. However, Ferguson (cited in Kellner and Share, 2007) warned that media is like an iceberg so that media literacy may lead students only to see the tip of the iceberg appearing on the surface of the sea; whereas they actually need to see what is not seen.

The fourth approach to media education is critical media literacy. Kellner and Share (2007, p. 60) define critical media literacy as “an educational response that expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies”. This approach includes the first three approaches and focuses on ideology critique and analysis of politics of representations of gender, class and sexuality. It also opens a bigger possibility for literacy education to critically analyze how media and audience as well as information and power are related. (Kellner and Share, 2007; Garcia, Seglem & Share, 2013). Critical media literacy sharpens skills in analyzing media codes and convention, improves students’ abilities to criticize generalization, ideologies, dominant values and develops competencies to understand multiple meanings and messages conveyed by media (Kellner and Share, 2005). As such, critical media literacy depends on guiding students to explore the hidden ideologies and relations between power and information (Garcia, Seglem & Share, 2013). However, critical media literacy does not stop here. It facilitates media production, which is an essential part of such literacy because it empowers students to voice their own message and opens an opportunity to challenge media text (Kellner and Share, 2007; Garcia, Seglem & Share, 2013).

Considering the aforementioned four approaches to media education, this study would like to borrow critical media literacy. Regardless the discussion stating that critical media literacy is constituted of the other three approaches, there are some other considerations underlying the selection. One is the purpose of incorporating media literacy into today’s education. According to The American National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) cited in Scheibe and Rogow (1999/2008, p.3), it is aimed at assisting learners to “develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today’s world”. This objective enables media literate youth to better digest the complex messages delivered in media to understand how the messages are constructed and meanings are created.

Second, focusing on the exploration of hidden ideologies and the connection between power-information, critical media literacy also includes critical literacy. Critical literacy believes that meaning is created through the narrative voice, who perceive the messages from a particular angle so that there is a need to read a text from different perspectives (Shor, 1997, p.1) to make readers and students realize that “there is more than one version available” (Green cited in “Connecting Research and Practice, 2012, p.1). Critical literacy is also an appropriate tool to read the make-believe world in video games as it holds the notion that “imagination is not a pure, uncorrupted terrain” (hook cited in Lewis, 2000, p.55). This belief warns gamers to process the imagination and information in video games more carefully and invite them to challenge the values and assumptions depicted in text, which is in line with the principles of critical media literacy.

Furthermore, critical media literacy enables popular culture and media be analyzed as a means to reproduce dominant ideologies (Gracia, Seglem & Share, 2013). They add that this approach facilitates teacher to bring issues of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia into class when they discuss media and popular culture products students deal with everyday. In addition, lessons are more relevant and meaningful to students. More importantly, I believe critical media literacy gives a significant contribution to school and education. By facilitating media production, it puts schools and students, or education in general, at the position of subject instead of object. School and education have been considered as ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1989), which function as a means of disseminating and confirming dominant ideologies. In contrast, critical media literacy allows schools and education to challenge the dominant notions.

Some suggested Activities

The suggested activities are aimed at enabling students to confront and challenge the cultural and ideological hegemony underlying media and popular culture products. As Shor (1997) explains, students need to be made aware to read a text from different perspectives. To do it, students may be asked to consider the following questions:

- Who is your favorite video game hero/heroine?
- What do you think s/he look like?
- Do you prefer s/he to look different?
 - If yes, in what ways? Why?
 - If not, do you think s/he is a perfect image of a hero/heroine?

These questions help students and gamers digest the image of their favorite hero, whom they may often identify themselves with while they play the video game as the image often move past their analytical brain to immediately trigger emotions (“Introduction to Media Literacy”, p.1). In answering the questions, students are forced to postpone the emotion and to use their ratio and logic to think of their hero and provide reasoning as well as allow students to do some reflection, which is not given time and energy while playing the game (Lankshear and Knobel cited in Sanford & Madill, 2007). In this way, students may relate image and power and how the dominant notion of power is reflected in the image of their hero/heroine.

It is also possible to ask students to put themselves in the position of the marginalized; i.e. their hero’s enemy, to understand how domination and subordination are portrayed and how different perspectives of seeing the same object may result in contrasting ideas.

If you are your hero/heroine’s enemy, how would you describe the hero?

If you put a wanted ad to capture the hero, what caption are you going to write under his/her picture?

In answering the question, students may get shocked, realizing that they use a contrasting set of words to describe their hero, with whom they often identify themselves with. Instead of positively-connotative adjectives, such as powerful, brave, skillful, intelligent, they may use words such as sly, cruel and savage. This will help students to learn the importance of perception and that meaning is created and constructed.

The following situation forces students to think of alternative ideas to challenge to commonly used means of problem solving; i.e. violence.

- If the hero is badly-hurt and physically weak, and he is massively searched for by his strongest, toughest enemy, what should he do to survive, remembering that it is impossible for him to fight?

To address the issue of gender, students may be asked to identify themselves with Lara Croft and Bayonetta, and express how they feel about themselves and their heroic actions. After that, they are supposed to identify themselves with Lara Croft or Bayonetta's male enemy to express what they think of the heroines. This may help them dig out how men see women and the dominant notion of male gaze. Finally, they may be asked to create and describe their own version of Lara Croft and Bayonetta and explain the reasons behind their portrayal of the heroines..

Conclusion

Incorporating critical media literacy into education of young people offers some advantages. By bringing things young people deal with everyday into class, education becomes a part of the learners' life, making the border between formal education and past time activities blurred. Consequently, learning is more meaningful since students find it a part of their life, about their life. Besides, gamer students are facilitated to perceive video games not only as a product of technology and a matter of winning a game and feeling satisfied, but also a means of spreading ideology, power relations and social injustice. In this way, young gamers are expected to be more socially sensitive to injustice in the forms of oppression, marginalization, sexuality, gender, race and class. They may also be better able to voice their mind through media production so that they grow to be more socially sensible and responsible citizens, who are not judgmental, but tolerant and considerate. Finally, youngsters will not view videogames as a source of experiencing pleasure and achieving success over somebody else's suffering and loss but a means of understanding how injustice may be transferred and spread through seemingly-harmless entertainment.

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