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Media pedagogy and digital games

Educational Potentials of Digital Games: A Media Pedagogy Perspective

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Abstract: The study examines the educational potential of digital games through media pedagogy, asserting that these games harbor educational values awaiting discovery. Employing qualitative content analysis, critical media theory, and media semiotics, it identifies that genre-specific digital games, including adventures, interactive drama, and film narratives, offer educational insights that enhance reality comprehension. The educational values found in these games emphasize ethical principles like altruism and empathy. The conclusion drawn is that genre-specific digital games serve as informal learning tools with significant educational merit.

Keywords: digital games, educational values, interactive drama, learning, media pedagogy.

Introduction

The main goal of media pedagogy is to recognize the content of the messages that users are exposed to and harmonize it with educational values. This means that media pedagogy tries to *decode* the meanings of media messages addressed to young people. To achieve this, media education is necessary. The way media messages are decoded is a form of media competence. In this sense, media pedagogy starts from integrated systems of symbols and educational values of digital games. First, it is necessary to know the media reflect reality (Baacke, 2007, p. 34). The reality as experienced by students, parents and teachers is different from the *experienced* reality. What does that mean? First, media reality reflects the society and relationships in which we live. In other words, the media reality that appears in digital games, such as the problems of abuse, bullying, abandoning children, living with loss, represent the reality that young people are exposed to.

This media reality is proof that media pedagogy must not ignore the digital world and digital games (Bauer, 2007, p. 79), because they are not a construction of social reality but a reflection on the society in which we live. Therefore, media reality is also a subject of media pedagogy because the reality created in literature, film or music is also subject to educational values. Previous research on the educational value of digital games analysed the role of parenting and guardianship (Jukić, 2021), media competence (Škripcová, 2022), ethical value (Magová, 2020) and educational value (Jukić, 2023). The research question arises from all the above: Do interactive dramas have educational value?

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative content analysis and critical theory of media culture according to Kellner (2004). The method of deduction, interpretation, hermeneutics, concretization, and analysis was used. Also, the paper starts from the theory of educational philosophy according to Vuk-Pavlović (2016) and the context of educational values of digital games according to Jukić (2023). The study consists of two parts. In the first part, we analyse the importance of media pedagogy, media literacy, and media meaning of the text. In the second part, we present the meaning of educational values from the aspect of educational philosophy and compare it using the example of digital games. The aim of the study is research and to enable an in-depth understanding of the educational values that are present in digital games according to the genre of adventure and interactive drama.

Media pedagogy and the meaning of messages

Media pedagogy is an interdisciplinary field of educational sciences that combines two key concepts into one common entity, i.e. education and media. The most important dimensions of educators in media pedagogy are cognitive, social-affective, and ethical dimensions (Kačínová, 2018, p. 39). It follows from the above that education can take place *with* or *from* the media. Why is that important? This is because it enables learning through the media, but also informal learning when students are not aware of the influence of the media in the formation of attitudes, beliefs, and values. The best example of such learning is found in digital games in which there is media learning (Škripcová, 2022).

Media pedagogy contains ethical, social, psychological, political, and cultural analyses of the media. Digital games represent an entertainment medium that we understand as a form of cultural pedagogy (Kellner, 2004, p. 7). Therefore, it is extremely important to observe and interpret media constructs to gain a deeper insight into the digital world in which the user is surrounded. This leads us to the conclusion that the goal of media pedagogy is not only in decoding content but should be based on the concept of media literacy, media ethics and media competences. Therefore, the goal of media pedagogy is to decode media content. Škripcová (2021, p. 133) observes media competences from the aspect of critical thinking. In this sense, knowledge, skills, and abilities that help an individual to critically receive and analyse game represent the user's media competence. According to Jukić (2021; 2023), the user does

not always recognize the meaning of messages. According to Kellner (2004), we analyse media culture by interpreting media content and understanding the educational values of digital games. Such a point of view is identical to Baacke (2007), who claims that the media do not only produce entertainment, but also simulate it and enhance its reality.

This means that media pedagogy is realized through media culture, which serves the analysis of media messages and educational values. We decode such messages through critical semiotic analysis (Barthes, 2009, p. 141-163). According to Barthes (2009), the analysis of the meaning of signs can be interpreted at the denotation and connotation level. Denotation means a direct representation of a concept, i.e. an extra-linguistic object to which a linguistic sign refers. As an example of denotative meaning, we can compare the term mother in the digital games *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2013), *Life Is Strange 2* (Don't Nod, 2015), and *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo Studio, 2020), which has the meaning of parent. However, from the aspect of the connotation level, the term mother can be understood as a symbol of warmth, care and love that we find in the example of the digital game *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, but also as a symbol of vulnerability, care, sacrifice that we can find in the digital games *Heavy Rain* or as a symbol of emancipation, struggle and guilt like the digital game *Life Is Strange 2*.

Therefore, Barthes expands the meaning of the linguistic sign, which in the context of media pedagogy will be viewed as a media message within a digital game. Kellner (2004, p. 106-108) speaks very similarly in his media culture when he analyses the media content of a certain *ideology* and analyses the media content with a combination of semiotics and media criticism. The term ideology used by Kellner implies a certain worldview of society that is projected through images, symbols, and narrative within digital games. According to Jukić (2023), such images are interpreted as media content, symbols and meanings within media pedagogy that have certain educational values. In particular, the symbol of the mother who is not always portrayed as caring, warm, and loving but as fragile, vulnerable, and insecure. Also, the symbol of the father is shown through the prism of guilt, sacrifice, and helplessness. The function of media education is to interpret all aspects of the media society. Media competences are not always related to teachers but also to parents who are part of the media world. This means that media competences include moral values (Aufenanger, 2003, p. 147) that unite the social and cognitive dimensions. In this sense, the analysis of digital games represents media literacy and media competence because it helps to interpret the social environment.

Educational values in digital games

Media pedagogy starts from educational values. We can approach educational work from the point of view of educational values (Vukasović, 2001, p. 74-77) that we want to achieve. If we understand education, in the sense of the philosophy of education (Vuk-Pavlović, 2016) as the realization of social, humane, and personal values, education is an attempt to create better individuals. The key is the notion of *trying* because education does not always have to succeed. This means that the learning effect can only be achieved by the learner, and educational activities can only contribute to this. In this sense, the results of media pedagogy refer to the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor areas. This means that educational outcomes mean the expected changes that we achieve through educational, cultural, and ethical values. However, the educational values that we find in games like *Heavy Rain*, *Life Is Strange 2*, *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, and *A Plague Tale: Requiem* (Asobo Studio, 2022) are created between two poles: experiences and reflections of educators.

Specifically, the aims and norms of educational values are subject to historical change and create a different order of social, ethical, and humane values. As an example, the digital game *Heavy Rain* puts educators in a position where they take a stand on parental relationships, on acceptance of guilt and willingness to sacrifice. Also, students are taught that every decision has consequences, and the parental relationship is portrayed as difficult, responsible, and uncertain. The image of an ideal family is shown in

a distorted way and teaches us, like literature, through the example of the protagonist, that value principles, altruism and empathy are key in the development of an individual. From the aspect of the philosophy of education, the goal of pedagogy is to create a person who will have complete humane and moral qualities (Vuk-Pavlović, 2016). The purpose of such ethical education is to form moral understandings. The basic human values that students acquire in the family, school and society can also be acquired through informal socializing with other users who have played digital games. In this sense, education implies interpersonal relations and communication.

Thanks to the interactivity of digital games, especially interactive drama, students accept educational values that are reflected through the game and are significantly different from traditional media in which the user is a passive observer. The advantage of using digital games in the context of accepting educational values comes from the direct interaction of students with the protagonists in the game and the experience with the game. A good example can be seen in the games *A Plague Tale: Innocence* and *A Plague Tale: Requiem*, where it is shown how the sister takes on the role of guardian and educator, or in the example of *Life Is Strange 2*, where the brother takes on the role of educator and guardian. Narratologically, the interactive drama starts from putting the user in the position of choosing between good and evil, i.e. between making a decision that reflects on the student's values, beliefs, and ethical attitudes. For example, in the game *Heavy Rain*, the user can choose how to end the story and how much responsibility he is willing to take. In this way the student learns to accept others and not to judge them. According to Jukić (2023), the educational values found in interactive dramas can be described as ethical, humane, and family values (see Table 1). Educational values represent ideals that serve in designing educational goals. This means that education is engaged in values and achieves its educational goals through educational values such as: altruism, honesty, empathy, dignity, love, and care.

Table 1

Educational values of interactive drama

	Ethical values	Human values	Family values
Dimensions	Altruism, honesty	Empathy, dignity	Love, care
A symbol of value	Hand, eye	Mother, father	Sister, brother

Source: author 's own development

For instance, ethical values such as altruism and honesty are exemplified in games like "*Life Is Strange 2*" and "*Heavy Rain*," where they are symbolized through hand and eye motifs. Specifically, "*Heavy Rain*" challenges the player to decide whether to sacrifice part of an arm to save a child, while in "*Life Is Strange 2*," the loss of an eye metaphorically represents the sacrifice made to save a brother. These ideals are also reflected in the humane values of interactive drama, where empathy and dignity are symbolized through the characters of the mother and father. In "*Life Is Strange 2*," for instance, players learn to respect the mother's choices, and in "*Heavy Rain*," the father's quest to find his son illustrates his suffering. Furthermore, family values such as love and care are central to the narrative of interactive dramas, as seen when a sister assumes guardianship over her younger brother in "*A Plague Tale: Innocence*" and "*A Plague Tale: Requiem*," and the power of brotherly love is showcased in "*Life Is Strange 2*."

Analysing the educational values of digital games that show different relationships within the family lead to the conclusion that values change according to the environment in which we live. As an example, families are shown without father or mother and siblings take on the role of guardian. In this sense, the perspective of the authority is shifted to the protagonist, and student immersion enables a deeper

understanding of the media content. According to the education philosophy of Vuk-Pavlović (2016, p. 100), we understand authority as a value experience, and it is precisely the symbol of authority that is shown in the protagonist of the digital game.

Conclusion

Digital games that are defined by the genre of adventure and interactive drama can be viewed from the aspect of media pedagogy. The reason for such an observation stem from the emphasis on the narrative, and not on the gameplay itself, unlike other genres. Therefore, interactive drama can be analysed from the aspect of educational values, which are often part of ethical and humane values within the game itself. As an example, we analysed ethical, humane, and family values of interactive dramas that teach their users. Such a form of learning can be used in the context of pedagogy of free time and informal learning, and it is particularly effective because it introduces students to complex and existential issues through games, entertainment, and stories. The advantage of this form of adoption of educational values is that interactive drama, with its immersion and interaction, puts the student in a position of empathy, acting on his beliefs and experience.

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