Visual Learning and Identity Construction through Gamification in Visual Art Education

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Abstract: The learning potential of video games and possible benefits of playing them have been researched in educational settings (Gee, 2007; Prensky, 2006; Shaffer, 2006) and this has inspired new ways to include digital games in education, such as gamification (Kapp, 2012 for an example) and game-based learning. The importance of gamification in education is stressed by the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, implemented in the autumn of 2016 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). However, not all teachers are necessarily aware of what gamification can entail and how it might enhance their students’ learning. In the earlier national core curricula, digital games were only mentioned once in visual art education and as something to analyze and critically reflect upon. With this taken into consideration and in order to better understand how gamification may enhance students’ learning in a Swedish-speaking context in Finland, the Art Education in basic education is a natural starting point.

The aim of this paper is to explore how gamification can enhance visual learning and identity construction in basic education. This work in progress is presented as part of the PhD Colloquium and the paper will be part of Matilda Ståhl’s (ÅAU) doctoral thesis on informal virtual learning environments. The study is done in collaboration with Hannah Kaihovirta, PhD (ÅAU), and Minna Rimpilä, ME, at Vasa övningsskola. The study will be conducted with Rimpilä’s students aged 12-13 at Vasa övningsskola during the spring of 2017 inspired by PAR - Participatory Action Research and Visual Ethnography. The data will consist of video recordings, screen recordings as well as images created by the students.

Preliminary results indicate that gamification will enhance Art Education in basic education in regard to visual expression and identity construction.

Key words: video games, gamification, visual art education, visual art, identity construction

1 Introduction

The importance of gamification in education is stressed by the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, implemented in the autumn of 2016 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). However, not all teachers are necessarily aware of what gamification can entail and how it might enhance their students’ learning. In the earlier National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004) the only mention of video games was in the specific goals for visual art education. Video games were however mentioned as something that was to be analysed and critically pondered upon. Although its was from a critical perspective, the visual art education was the only school subject addressing the importance of video games. Some implications on how gamification might affect a Finnish Educational Context have been mentioned in Ståhl (2016) for an example. Räsänen (2012) states the importance of identity when creating and experiencing art and Kaihovirta and Rimpilä (2016) explore identity construction with Rimpiläs students in visual art education, yet not from the perspective of gamification.

We therefore stress that visual art education is a natural starting point for research aiming to better understand the learning potentials in regard to video games and identity construction. This paper, although a work in progress, serves as a starting point, discussing some of the theoretical framework that will work as a foundation for the study.
2 Identity construction in virtual learning environments

Identity construction offers interesting perspectives on video games and learning. Identity is an ambiguous term and not easily defined due to the different ways to interpret it (Buckingham, 2008). The following are some theories that offer an understanding of the complexity of identity construction in regard to virtual learning environments such as video games.

When it comes to video games, it is, according to Juul (2010), possible to make a distinction between different types of players: casual players and hardcore players. Although these are not two definite categories there are a number of traits that tend to divide players, such as how much money and time one is willing to spend on video games. However, Juul (2010) further states that although one might have been a stereotype hardcore player before, it is possible that the current life situation restricts how much time one can spend on playing video games. Whether or not stereotype casual players would be willing to identify themselves as gamers is however an interesting question in regard to the learning potential of video games. Juul does not address this issue and we hope to further investigate it in our study.

James Paul Gee (2007) makes a distinction between three different types of identities that are active while playing video games. He refers to the first as the virtual identity: “one’s identity as a virtual character in the virtual world” (Gee, 2007, p. 49). This identity is clearly defined by the game itself and the possibilities it offers in regard to character development and gameplay. Any playable character in a video game has certain traits and abilities as well as limitations, and different games offer different possibilities for the player to affect them. These traits and abilities are part of the players’ experience and therefore part of their identity as the character’s success and failure are in part their doing at the same time as it is not.

The second identity that, according to Gee is active when playing video games is the real-world identity or the identity of a non-virtual player. This identity in itself consists of a number of identities based on gender, age, occupation and so forth. Only the identities that are active while playing video games and therefore part of the gamer identity are however relevant in this situation. It is however an interesting question to ponder, which of one’s identities are actually active when playing video games and how it affects the experience and in what ways these identities are affected by the game experience. (Gee, 2007).

The third and final identity is also the most complex one. Gee calls it the projective identity and defines it as: “playing on the two senses of the word ‘project’ meaning both ‘to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character’... and ‘seeing the virtual character as one’s project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory trough time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become” (Gee, 2007, p. 50). This identity explores the interaction between the virtual identity and the real-world identity. The projective identity is part of the creation of the character one wishes to be in the virtual world yet clearly affected by values and aspirations from the non-virtual world. (Gee, 2007).

Yee (2014) describes what he calls the Proteus Paradox: that the gamers’ non-virtual identity affects the avatar and the potential implications this might have for the interaction in an online game and the gamers themselves. According to Gee (2007) it is crucial to the learning process that the student feels that he or she is a person that can learn in a specific field and that the field of learning becomes part of the students identity. He further states that video games offer the players an environment where risks are low and compares this to what Eric Erickson calls a “psychosocial moratorium” – that is, a learning space in which the learner can take risks where real-world consequences are lowered” (Gee, 2007, p. 59). There are several ways video games and identity construction connect in regard to learning, yet our interests lie on further investigating how this might affect and be affected by visual learning and visual art education.

3 Methodology

In the overview of the OECD publication Winner, Goldstein and Vincent-Lancrin (2013) discuss whether or not arts education can enhance certain skills, such as innovation. They argue, based on a number of studies that
there is no conclusive evidence which would clearly state that arts education enhances certain skills. They do however state that this might be a result of weaknesses in the research in regard to methodology as well as theoretical framework. Therefore, they state a need for further empirical research where “Researchers need to build stronger theoretical frameworks on why and how arts education can be hypothesised to develop certain skills which then transfer to other academic subjects.” (Winner, Goldstein & Vincent-Lancrin. 2013, p. 12-13). This study intends to explore a part of this field with a focus on visual arts education in regard to video games. Visual art is a broad term and this study has a focus on different forms of digital images. The theoretical framework, partly presented in this paper, is based on educational research on video games as well as theories from visual arts education as well as theories on identity construction.

The study is inspired by Visual Ethnography and PAR - Participatory Action Research. In visual ethnography, the data consists of different types of visual material such as images or videos for an example. The researcher interprets, analyses and categorizes this data while still trying to keep the intent and context of the participant in mind (Pink, 2013). The data will consist of video recordings of the focus students, photographs of the entire class as well as the images created by the students.

A pilot phase of the study will be conducted during the late spring of 2017 with Rimpilä’s students aged 12 and 13 at Vasa övningsskola. Within the visual art education, the students will be given a task inspired by video game environments. The students will, in pairs, create their own game like environment by using different layers of paper. By using the cameras on their tablets, the students will take a photo of the different layers together and thereby create a complete image. The task does not only offer the students the possibility to express themselves inspired by the visually diverse world of video games but also offer the students a better understanding of fore- and background and depth in an image.

4 Preliminary findings and discussion

Preliminary results indicate that gamification will enhance visual art education in basic education in regard to visual expression and identity construction. Using video games and gamification in visual art education offer unexpected tools for exploring one’s identity where the line between fiction and reality becomes blurred and this might present new ways to increase innovation.

References


