

Chapter 38

Playful Pedagogies: Cultural and Curricular Approaches to Game-Based Learning in the School Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Game-based learning is proliferating in formal school classrooms, yet to date there is relatively little evidence to demonstrate its benefits. This chapter provides analysis from empirical studies of computer games use in authentic classroom settings. It explores game-based learning as the result of specific game-based pedagogies that are being developed and practised by increasing numbers of classroom teachers in UK schools. In particular, the chapter focuses on the ways in which practising classroom teachers discuss and describe game-based learning in relation to their curricular intentions and their less formal cultural assumptions about the relevance of gaming in learners' new media ecologies outside of school. The chapter argues that teachers have developed a cultural discourse and a curricular discourse for articulating game-based learning. These two modes for understanding game-based learning are described, and data from two studies are discussed to indicate how these understandings translate into classroom activity.

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INTRODUCTION: GAMES ADVOCACY OR EVIDENCE?

The alleged connections between children's learning and their playing of computer games have been amplified in recent years. Computer games, it is regularly argued, are an ideal medium for learning at a time when children's access to ICT is proliferating and their digital media experiences are accelerating. Consequently, computer gaming practices are increasingly being advocated within schools and classrooms, and "game-based learning" is being established as an important innovation in educational modernization.

Yet, as Buckingham (2007) points out, "in the absence of solid empirical evidence about the actual use of games in the classroom, sweeping claims about their value"—which are "often drawn from an uncritical reading of the work of games advocates," he says—"continue to be recycled" (Buckingham, 2007, p. 116). Similarly, Salen (2008) states that, "[a]lthough there has been a considerable amount written on games and young people's use of them," the "debate around the value of games and gaming" has been, "to date, overly polemic and surprisingly shallow" (Salen, 2008, p. 2). Rhetoric on games and learning is often produced in *lieu* of any real research evidence, with advocacy and polemic interpreted as if it constitutes fresh intelligence (Kirriemuir, 2007), while researchers on games and learning sometimes seem to be suffering from intellectual amnesia, neglecting to note that there is a long history of prior research and publications in the field (Egenfeldt-Neilsen, 2006).

This chapter provides analysis from two related empirical studies of computer games use in authentic classroom settings. It explores game-based *learning* as the result of specific game-based *pedagogies* that are being developed and practised by increasing numbers of classroom teachers in UK schools. Based on data collected during two interrelated game-based learning projects in

schools, educative gaming in classroom contexts is viewed as a nexus of formal *professional* and *curricular* intentions orchestrated by teachers and their less formal *popular* and *cultural* assumptions about the relevance of gaming in young people's new media ecologies outside of school. In other words, the educational use of computer games in UK schools is informed both by a *professional-curricular discourse* of curriculum modernization and by a *populist-cultural discourse* of cultural relevance. The specific focus of the chapter is therefore on the "playful pedagogies" developed by teachers as both a professional and a populist set of practical classroom strategies.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Our data comes from two empirical studies of game-based teaching and learning in school classrooms in the UK. (Full project details can be located at <http://www.futurelab.org.uk>)

Teaching with Games

The first project, Teaching with Games, which was funded by Electronic Arts and took place in 2005-06, explored how teachers might develop classroom pedagogies to facilitate game-based learning. The project examined in practice recent claims about the role of commercially-developed games in supporting learning (e.g., Prensky, 2001; Gee, 2003). Specifically, the project aimed to:

- Offer an overview of teachers' and students' use of computer games, and the attitude towards the use of such games in schools.
- Identify institutional, curricular, technical and cultural factors impacting on the incorporation of computer games into existing school practices.

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