

Learning and Literacy through Videogaming

BCLA Conference Session S5

Presenters: Dr. Kathy Sanford, Leanna Madill and Liz Merkel
Convener: Libby McKeever

Introduction

Kathy Sanford is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria. She currently holds the position of Associate Dean of Teacher Education. Apart from her literacy research and teaching interests, one of Dr. Sanford's current research projects is a Canadian Council on Learning funded project entitled Literacy Learning Through Video Games. Dr. Sanford was joined by graduate students and research collaborators, Liz Merkel and Leanna Madill. Leanna is also working with parents to analyze their perception of videogaming.

Common concerns

Dr. Sanford's study has involved a group of mainly adolescent boys over the past few years. The study is a response to the results of standardized testing in schools that suggest that girls are more literacy successful than boys. Videogaming is an umbrella term for games played on the computer, whether online or via a console. Girls are also involved in gaming albeit a less visible portion of the videogaming community, and both boys and girls participate at school, at home and in libraries

Dr. Sanford surveyed the session's audience about their concerns or perceptions of videogames. She concluded that the audience's issues were common to other groups. These included societal concerns such as safety, violence, lack of participation, inactivity, sexism, low reading, isolation, reduced time outdoors, addiction, companies marketing to children, and racism. Dr. Sanford stated that her research suggests that lack of reading, isolation and addiction are misconceptions.

Are they learning?

Gamers are all kinds of people, including adults who play scrabble, online or enjoy Dance, Dance Revolution, Wii sport or Rock Band. Audience members were asked what meaningful learning they have experienced recently. One participant cited a previous workshop. Dr. Sanford suggested that videogaming brings similar meaningful learning to

lives of the gamers. Participants are fully engaged in digital learning and are reading constantly, though not necessarily linear or print text. They are involved in multiple literacies including, symbols, angles, visuals, colours, music, language, artifacts and actions. This non-linear learning is enabling the children to make connections and transfer their learned skills. Dr. Sanford stated that children are engaged in a sophisticated type of learning that utilizes alternate semiotic texts and literacy is gained not solely through words.

Transferrable skills

Dr. Sanford spoke to Gee's book, *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*, which suggests that video games employ a well developed teaching scaffolding (Gee, 2003). Children continually work with the game's tools and take little steps in learning to master new skills before moving onto the next stage. They push themselves to get better and eventually they become the teachers. While watching another less experienced players, Dr. Sanford's team observed that gamers will hold back and wait, offering suggestions such as "what would have if you tried this?" They also took on a leadership role and encouraged others to try again, and noticed that there was no stigma in failure. Gamers play with all ages, not just their peers. They take risks and push their knowledge boundaries to achieve success. Mastery is valued.

Kids are making connections between the games they are playing and social, cultural and political issues. They are multitasking; reading website reviews, writing blogs, creating web pages, participating in forums, monitoring fan websites, and creating YouTube videos. Gamers are taking leadership roles online, in forums at libraries, in teen boards and in international gaming guilds. They are networking together to problem-solve complex issues, learning to engage in the problem and collaborate on ideas until it is solved. Gamers were observed to be excellent at articulating their message

Liz Merkel talked about "mash up," when participants utilize two or more different types of data, such as visual and sound to create something new. Gamers are creating "Machinimas" where they will videotape a game, write a script that overlays the action and then dub in the voice and sound effects. They then

share this on YouTube or on machinima.ca or machinima.com

Leanna Madill spoke to why girl gamers are not so obvious. It appears girls don't need gaming for identity and it isn't a necessary social currency for them to be part of a group. The boys take on the gamer's identity when forming friendships. Leanna reiterated that there are positive outcomes from computer engagement. Gamers learn negotiation with "turn taking" and acquire computer skills that then transfer into job skills.

Giving value to alternate forms of literacy

Parents commented that they want their kids to fit in and have friends. They often will add that their gaming child may not be the typical boy. In fact they are competitive but with themselves and they do display imagination, and athleticism, but in the gaming world not on the sports field. When questioned, the study group of gamers didn't see themselves as valued, literate, mathematicians or scientists but they actually are constantly dealing with multiliteracies including learning angels, bar graphs, geometry and statistics. The study has helped them "unpack" or discover the layers of knowledge they have acquired and were thrilled that Dr. Sanford's team were taking an interest in something that was important to them.

Parents will often value a child who sits and reads a book but not one who is playing video games. As adults we structure weekends so we can do things we enjoy, but then we are able to separate and go back to work on Monday. A child should also enjoy free time, and whether they are reading a book or reading online, they are engaging in literacy learning and parents can help them to learn to separate to go on to another task. Businesses are now seeking people who have past experience with online networking. For example, those who have been contributing to a global forum or leading a guild

have been building positive international relations skills.

A parent's role

Dr. Sanford pointed out that competitiveness and violence is seen in our sports culture, and sexism, in our social and popular cultures. It is up to parents to monitor the games that their child chooses to play. Parents need to assess the quality and value of the game. They should listen and ask open ended questions such as, "What do you think?" "Why did you choose that character/avatar?" "What would you change?" "Why aren't there many female avatars?" or "Could you make a game that better represented people?" Gaming must have time limits and parents need to be an active participant in their child interests.

Further Information

<http://www.videogameliteracy.blogspot.com/>

Resources for parents, educators and librarians

- Cassell, J. (1998) *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Johnson, S. (2005). *Everything bad is good for you*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Prensky, M. (2006). *"Don't interrupt me mom, I'm learning."* St. Paul, MN: Paragon House.

Libby McKeever is the Youth Services Coordinator at Whistler Public Library in Whistler, British Columbia.