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Digital Competence and Literacy: Developing New Narrative Formats. The «Dragon Age: Origins» Videogame

Competencia digital y literacidad: nuevos formatos narrativos
en el videojuego «Dragon Age: Orígenes»

ABSTRACT

The approach of this article is centered on the concepts of digital competence and new narrative formats. We aim to apply these dimensions to the videogame «Dragon Age Origins», winner of the 2009 videogame of the year award. Its features –plot, characters and interactivity– make it ideal reading material in other formats and are highly motivational for young people. The development of digital competence signifies new literacy, and it is necessary to find new stimulating resources that combine the fun and formative dimensions. Equally relevant are multimodal texts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), especially new narrative formats that imply social progress, as the ways of reading are different. The texts have acquired new formats with the same quality as books but they sometimes motivate users more. This is the case of «Dragon Age Origins», a dark heroic fantasy role-playing game set in a unique world containing a story to be read and experienced. Our analysis of the videogame discusses whether it should be considered a form of reading or not.

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como ejes conceptuales la competencia digital, la literacidad y los nuevos formatos narrativos. El aprendizaje permanente incluye las mismas como claves de la formación de la persona y sobre todo, como elemento que va a contribuir a su inserción en una sociedad dinámica y cambiante. Tras analizar dichas dimensiones, las mismas serán reflejadas en el videojuego denominado «Dragon Age: Orígenes», galardonado con el premio juego de rol del año en el año 2009. El desarrollo de la competencia digital conlleva una nueva alfabetización y en la misma es preciso hallar recursos motivadores para que dicha adquisición sea a la vez una cuestión lúdica y formativa. Otro aspecto relevante que será tratado en el texto tiene que ver con la multimodalidad textual (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), sobre todo con los nuevos formatos narrativos. Este hecho supone un importante avance social ya que las formas de lectura varían apareciendo formas distintas más motivadoras para el usuario pero no por ello poseen menor calidad. Éste es el caso de «Dragon Age: Orígenes», un juego de rol basado en la fantasía heroica ubicado en un mundo novedoso. Dicho juego se convierte en una excelente historia para ser leída y experimentada.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Competencias básicas, comunicación digital, software, videojuegos, ficción, lectura, alfabetización tecnológica.
Basic competences, digital communication, software, videogames, fiction, reading, technological literacy.

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1. Lifelong learning: new competences for a dynamic and changing society

In 2005, the Council of Europe listed eight key competences related to lifelong learning. Communication in the mother tongue; communication in a second language; numeracy and competence in Science and Technology; digital competence; learning to learn; interpersonal and civic competence; initiative and cultural expression (European Commission, 2005). Former EC president Jacques Delors (1996) had previously viewed education as a heritage issue that became the basis of this lifelong learning philosophy.

We are now aware of these competences and our aim is to develop and promote them. These competences are defined as a combination of knowledge, abilities and attitudes adapted to this context. People need them for personal development, active citizenship and social inclusion. Escamilla (2009) explains that the genesis of this approach is related to a «know-how» concept to be applied to different contexts in people's lives: domestic, social, academic and work.

This reclaimed autonomy must be highlighted in a society where people are bombarded by materialistic stimuli. The educational community should accept this and try to combine capitalism with the need for a civic education (Bolívar, 2003). The new educative paradigms must be updated, which may mean that we have to develop the aforementioned competences as part of people's education.

Nowadays, digital literacy is in demand in study programs (this refers to levels of education). This aim is honourable although, as Aguaded (2010) explains, civil society has to collaborate in what should be a progressive process of implementation. We cannot ignore the importance of a non-formal educational context. This is the objective of this article, as we try to incorporate elements from the social field to the development of digital competence and literacy. This article aims to contribute suitable alternatives to digital literacy.

2. Digital competence

Touriñán (2004) explained that digital education was a challenge for the digital society in schools since it required a technical knowledge and a strategic objective for innovation in the field of Pedagogy. Digital literacy is now a challenge that has been met but the fact remains that we do not know whether technology can be incorporated in education. The concept we refer to as digital competence could be defined as follows: «Digital competence implies a safe

and critical use of the Information Society Technologies (IST) for work, entertainment and communication purposes» (European Commission, 2005: 18).

It refers to a skill related to the acquisition, assessment, production, presentation or exchange of information or the possibility of participating in communication networks through the use of the Internet. We firmly believe that this competence should be part of digital education (e-Education) in which the abilities, habits, attitudes and knowledge that help people to exist, move, learn or interact in the digital dimension will be developed. Does this mean that this new configuration will substitute traditional literacy? No. The idea is that we continue benefiting from both.

Digital literacy, or the development of this competence, implies that people will be able to apply their IST knowledge to ordinary life situations. It is our aim to make these resources useful, either as a word processor or as a tool for creativity and innovation. Our text goes further by exploring fictional worlds (videogames). These are useful tools that help us understand young people's interests, to understand diversity or even develop multiple intelligences (Montero & Ruiz Díaz, 2010). We focus on a videogame in which linguistic and literary abilities converge, and the concept of digital literacy deployed is developed in the following section.

3. Digital literacy

Understanding literacy as the condition of being able to read and write implies a basic understanding but we must take into account that we are using knowledge and attitudes in addition to reading and writing. Cassany (2000) points out that social values and ways of thinking are added to this knowledge and attitudes. Thus, the term literacy requires an expansion of this basic definition, the reading and writing of not only printed but also digital texts. Traditionally, we consider reading to mean hard copy, but what happens with other formats that contain stories and texts? Is it possible to consider the videogame an electronic text? Of course, it is another kind of reading but the development of this skill is similar, and some specific knowledge is required in order to understand the messages and the whole story.

It is necessary to refer to the concept of digital competence and connect it to electronic literacy. This is a live issue since, when considering learning languages or literature, certain changes and resources taking place in our society must be taken into account. Technology is a reality and it is our duty to find

suitable ways to make the best use of it, and not just as entertainment. Digital literacy is a new challenge for educators and, of course it has several potentially worthwhile characteristics which must be exploited.

Reinking (1992) sites the interaction between readers and texts as one such characteristic. An active user is a motivated user. This is one of the biggest drawbacks of hard copy texts for young people. Another characteristic indicated by Reinking (1992) is that electronic texts may contain different structures. Videogames are ideally structured to develop different skills. If we select games with more content than an arcade perspective, we have material that is strong enough to motivate young people to acquire and maintain the reading habit. Previous experiences in language teaching, that of Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) for instance, allow us to see how this digital literacy can be fostered in ways that will also enhance young people's ability to learn to read printed texts. Indeed, an interesting, new line of research would be to focus on how students approach writing and reading in hypertexts.

4. The videogame: beyond entertainment

When analyzing what a videogame is, we associate it with the field of entertainment. A definition that corroborates this point is: «A digital game with entertainment objectives, which uses computer technology and allows player interaction with the machine in real time, and in which action is fundamentally developed with visual support (on the screen of a portable console, a personal computer, a television or another support)» (Tejeiro & Del Río, 2003: 20).

Is it possible to believe in videogames that contribute to people's education with their various dimensions? From our point of view it is possible. It is true, as Gómez del Castillo (2007) points out, that videogames are based on competition, on being the best, the most extreme in violence, sexism and racism, and triumphing in economic environments. This may well be the most generalized opinion people have about them.

But there are other ways of designing videogames

that offer the user challenging stories, because the abilities they have to develop are related to cognitive, reading and decision-making aspects. Montes Pérez (2010: 48) establishes a difference between a graphic adventure and a role-playing game. Both are videogames but the first is limited, while a role-playing game is characterized by the importance of creating the character and the way he acts, as well as the freedom of action the user is given when playing.

Our choice is a role-playing videogame whose main characteristics derive from what is known as interactive fiction. Basically, this is computer-mediated

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narrative. In hard copy texts, it would resemble the kind of stories that offer the readers the possibility of choosing their own adventure. The user must read a short text and then has to choose the course of action he wants the main character to take. In the case of *Dragon Age Origins*, the story will vary depending on the instructions given by the user, as will the number of characters involved and even the plot itself. Interactive fiction requires the text-analysis skills of a literary scholar, so the skills are developed by means of a different format. The structure of this game would probably be more sophisticated than the typical fantasy novel.

Another relevant issue with the new formats is that the role-playing game enhances communication among players. As in reading forums, gamers can chat about the game and share problems and experiences so as to move the story forward.

This is a kind of immersion in a fictional world and at the same time an interaction with a virtual reality. *Dragon Age Origins* could be a hard copy book but has the advantages of a videogame (graphics, music, interaction, etc).

5. New narrative formats

The concept of interactive fiction means that its application is different, above all due to morphological diversity. There will be variations depending on the author and the content. However, it is possible to establish a common point: interactivity. This changes the way fiction is perceived since, thanks to interactivity, the reader is the main character on some occasions and the author on others. The experience of reception becomes more complete.

From the aesthetic of reception (Jauss, 1977; Iser, 1987), interactivity offers the opportunity to choose different possibilities for continuing the story, new narrative sequences and new paths of information

copies to share a space. In the following section we describe our videogame as an example of a new narrative format and interactive fiction.

6. «Dragon Age: Origins», and the story of the Grey Wardens

«Men and women from every race, warriors and magi, barbarians and kings... the Grey Wardens sacrificed everything to stem the tide of darkness...and prevailed» (Duncan, head of the Grey Wardens in Ferelden).

This is the essential message that underlies the story of «Dragon Age: Origins». As a videogame, this is a dark heroic fantasy set in an imaginary world, a deep, complex story filled with varied characters and plots. We cannot compare playing time and reading time but when the user finishes the game, he will have been playing for almost 70 hours. Half that time is dedicated to the arcade dimension and the remainder to reading and interaction. For this reason, it could be considered a fantasy novel. This underlines our argument on the new narrative formats and the way they promote reading.

Regarding interactive fiction, it is very important that the users/readers surround themselves with companions on their journey, each with their own unique story and motivations. Inside the videogame we can find a full, rich world of cultures, wars and politics. There are several imaginary places based on Ferelden (a fictional world similar to the Middle Earth created by Tolkien), the land in which men, women and different races live. As an epic/heroic story we find different types of characters such as Magi, Rogues or Warriors. Combat and magic are combined in this story. The characters, depending on their condition, are able to cast spells or use different weapons in combat. One of the main points of the game/story is that the user can create his own character endowing it with the characteristics they need to play in the world of «Dragon Age: Origins».

The main character's mission is to become a Grey Warden and to avoid the emergence of the Dark Spawn, but to do this he will need help from the different characters who themselves are involved in politics, wars or intrigues. Depending on the decisions

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about the main characters, settings and plots. Interactivity offers the possibility of changing the story as if the user were simultaneously author and reader—entirely possible in videogames—.

Esnaola and Levis (2008) consider this to be a cultural advance. Professionals claim ever more vigorously that it is possible to develop new materials—in particular videogames that are culturally valuable. So these authors aim to create an interdisciplinary work situated between the education field and communication industry.

The new narrative formats are a reality containing stories with intertextuality mixed with others that are autonomous. The challenge people now face is to learn how to read them, although it is not dissimilar to traditional reading. Martos (2007) points out that postmodern society needs a new focus for reading. The format is different but the goal is the same: to read. In rescuing the reading habit the attractiveness of the new formats can be an advantage. In this sense, the educator can combine book content with that of the videogame, thus enabling digital texts and hard

and actions taken, the player's entourage will be large or small. During the game the user must learn how to become a good leader since all the decisions and actions taken will condition his fate. As in other high fantasy stories, alliances or entourages are crucial to defeating the Dark Spawn. They have their own opinions and objectives, and may ask for The Warden's help on quests of their own. The main character can recruit different companions that will be active or not (because the Warden can only use three at a time, but they can be replaced depending on the situation). However, The Warden can make decisions that will result in a companion leaving, or even dying.

Leadership plays an important role in partner interaction. It may change depending on plot decisions or gifts. There are 10 full partners in «Dragon Age: Origins», and seven in «Dragon Age: Origins» – Awakening (the sequel). Some of the characters in «Dragon Age: Origins» are Alistair, a new Grey Warden, Leliana, a Chantry sister, Morrigan, a Witch of the Wilds, Oghren, a dwarven Berserker, Sten, a gunary warrior, Wynne: a senior enchanter from the Circle, Zevran: an Antivan assassin and the dog: a magari war hound. In the sequel, we find the following characters: Anders: an apostate mage. Justice: a trapped Fade Spirit. Mhairi: a Ferelden warrior. Nathaniel: a human rogue. Oghren: a dwarven Berserker (the same character as in «Dragon Age: Origins»), Sigrun: a dwarf rogue. Vellanna: a Dalish magus.

This is a complex videogame that requires the user to read constantly and which creates a parallel universe with several story lines and endings. The videogame plot is available in book form as «Dragon Age: the stolen» and «Dragon Age: the calling» (Gaider 2009a; 2009b). New formats such as comics allow the text to be expanded. This is a good example of a combination of tradition and modernity, because the story of this videogame is based on an epic. Other authors like Garin and Pérez (2009) have developed work on videogames that are closer in form to science fiction. The skills developed through «Dragon Age: Origins» are multiple because the user needs to be computer literate, use his reading experience and the cognitive skills (memory or attention) relevant to it. To all this we would also add the entertainment dimension, which gives the user extra motivation.

7. Recurrent topics in «Dragon Age: Origins», intertextuality

Lukens (2003) reminds us that the high fantasy genre is primarily characterized by its focus on the

conflict between good and evil, in this case the Grey Wardens and the Dark Spawn, respectively. It is similar to Tolkien's (The Lord of the Rings) battle between Sauron's forces and the human, elf and dwarf races. High fantasy portrays full, complete human and classic characters such as the king without a throne, like the one depicted in this story. Alistair discovers that he is the heir of Ferelden but using the interactive fiction, players/users have the opportunity to put him back on the throne or not. This is a recurrent topic in literature because we find many instances in which the king must recover his throne after it was taken from him.

In this genre, credibility depends on the fantasy world that has been recreated. Ferelden is similar to Middle Earth, an invented world which must be reunified by the heroes. Themes throughout the role-playing videogame encompass a broad concern for Humanity, universalizing the human conflict of good versus evil. For this reason, the politics, wars and quests are orientated towards resolving this conflict.

Race is another recurrent element. Based on the high fantasy classics, elves, dwarves and wizards play their part in this story, each with specific skills, who, depending on the decisions made by the user/reader, may decisively influence the development of the story. Naturally the user needs to read the codex included in the game for a better understanding of the keys to this fantasy world.

Creatures such as ogres, dragons or spiders appear throughout the story. We have talked about politics or the relationship between good and evil, and we find betrayal as a feature of some of the characters. Sometimes the user/reader does not expect certain situations to arise that relate to such questions. This reminds us of Eddison's book, «The Worm Ouroboros», where two parties are battle for territory and supremacy.

It is clear that classic texts, above all, The Lord of the Rings, have influenced the design of this role-playing videogame. But the story is different and the characters are new and contextualized in a different fantasy world. This, added to the attractive design of the game (graphics and music), makes for a good quality product.

8. Conclusions: a new way of reading?

After analysing the role-playing videogame «Dragon Age: Origins», we need to answer the questions that posed in our text. We firmly believe new formats are a reality in society and it is time for educators to find new ways to promote reading. For instance, the book and the videogame of the classic

text *Treasure Island* (Stevenson) both exist. This digital version becomes an alternative to reading. Young people are a very active part of the world of electronic literacy and they probably feel more inclined to play videogames than to read books. This paper combines the entertaining dimension of games with the increasing need to develop reading habits. «*Dragon Age: Origins*» requires the user to spend a lot of time reading the situations and the codex in order to play the game properly. As a result, it becomes suitable material for helping young people to maintain a close relationship with reading. Recent trends in the teaching of languages (including cultures and literature) relate to the applied approaches and the language in use (González Piñero, Guillén & Vez Jeremías, 2010; Álvarez Angulo, 2010). In this situation, we have to redefine people's competences. Therefore, the development of digital competence has to be included in people's educational process. In «*Dragon Age: Origins*», high fantasy is alive and we have to find ways of combining printed and electronic copies in order to promote reading.

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