Serious Play: Curriculum for a Post-Talk Era[1]

SUZANNE DE CASTELL
Simon Fraser University

with

JENNIFER JENSON
York University

I knew I was in a state of epistemic emergency when I overheard myself (invariably a bad idea to listen) assigning in a doctoral seminar in Contemporary Curriculum Theory the task of seeing who could find the best picture of a woodbug on the internet. It just so happens that there aren't actually many woodbugs on the internet to choose from, and a kind of epistemic vertigo sets in when you stop to consider that this is actually a knowable proposition, an empirical truth which, contrary to every logical truth about possible black swans and limits to induction, actually encompasses the entire universe of possibilities. Because although real black swans and virtual woodbugs are supposedly very different, they are, epistemically, frighteningly the same, and with this realization erupts simultaneously into consciousness both the remarkable fact that I actually know something (about how many woodbugs there are on the internet) which is not just a little bit true, but True of the Entire Universe. In that dizzying moment when Truth on the internet meets virtual woodbugs, it helps to recall Simone Weils' observation that "the entire universe is nothing but a metaphor." (1942/1970, p. 98). In curriculum, what we most need is to learn more about the ways our tools work semiotically, like metaphors, to re-cast and re-configure both the forms, and the contents, of human intelligence.

• • • •

Working increasingly in a convergent digital medium which operates transformatively upon contemporary knowledge, skills and representational apparati, traditional learning tasks and hierarchies—even their physical locations within schools and classrooms—are being superceded by interdisciplinarity, spatio-temporal mobility, developmental heterogeneity, multimodal literacies and computer-based learning tools and resources.

Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies
Volume 1 Number 1 Spring 2003

All this is by way of pronouncing an end to the linguistic turn in which the knowable is commensurate with the sayable, and a beginning to multimodal epistemologies, with language clunking reductively along on the epistemic sidelines, where its limits and impediments to comprehension and capability go, as they say, without saying. The primary instrument of our times is digital code. Its new ontology is simple: *whatever is, exceeds its linguistic expression*. And its accompanying paradigm shifts, methodologically, are interdisciplinarity, representational convergence, and a further shift towards recognizing the unreliability of "the image" in much the same way the "the word" became highly suspect—think of the "Blair Witch Project"—a film that couldn't have happened if we hadn't been so familiar with documentary form/s in cinema and so ready (as an audience) to "accept" that as a "genre" of truth.

Curriculum: Contents Under Pressure

Under pressure to "integrate technology into the curriculum" (an interestingly far cry from earlier proclamations of technology's ability to "transform" curriculum), education has found itself hard pressed to conceive of what such an "integration," let alone anything approximating a "transformation," could look like. And so technology's principal use in curriculum development has had little to do with transformation and far more to do with its principal appeal to educational administrators: its unprecedented capabilities for surveillance, control, and documentation—all basically forms of record-keeping—and so of "educational *accountability*." However the fatal deficiency of technologically re-mediated curriculum so conceived is first and foremost the matter of content, more precisely, instructional technology's deferral of content, its primary lack, which renders technology's potential contributions to curriculum quite simply baffling for many of us accustomed as we are to text-based knowledge, however obediently and unreflectively consumed. Educators and "instructional designers" seeking to embrace new technologies for education who eschew any need for a radical epistemic rethinking of educational knowledge, or who construe educational technology's use as "putting your course materials on-line" have fallen prey to the dangers of mistaking properties of language for properties of mind, and properties, in particular, of written language for properties of knowledge. This profound "bewitchment of the intellect by language," as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1948) designated philosophy's distinctive corpus of dilemmas, aptly characterizes the intellectual betrayal that comes of doggedly clinging to the "textual preferences" of traditional school knowledge.

To the extent that human intelligence is reductively misrecognized as language, and language in turn misrepresented as the literal and formulaic textual forms and fragments most susceptible to becoming clearly and tightly

specifiable "learning outcomes" and "performance indicators" taught and tested, the public school's traditional mission, that of equipping a nation's children with a literate, educated sensibility, has succumbed: today, in many respects it seems that, far from inculcating youth with a sophisticated textual and linguistic fluency and facility, schooling has alienated an entire generation from its own language.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the colonization of critical educational discourse by the languages, thence the concepts and practices, of business. It's worth spending some time looking at what "getting down to business" in the New Economy has meant for education, first in terms of the "accountability" imperative which is at base responsible for the reduction of knowledge to literal and formulaic words, fragments and sentences whose *raison d'être* is often just the ease with which they can be evaluated, then calibrated in terms of productivity (greatest bang for the educational buck, in terms of teacher time and school resources "invested") and second, in terms of a ready calculation of comparisons, to determine and to document the distribution and relative "competitiveness" of learning outcomes as these are differentially instated in student bodies.

A third and further dimension of what is lost to education by getting down to business is the dimension of "play" that Joseph Addison (1711) long ago characterized as *wit*: an essential accomplishment of any well-educated person, this playful aspect of human intellectual life distinguished the well educated person from one merely, literally and prosaically, *schooled*. An ability to master conventions and rules—of language, of mathematics, of art, indeed of any educational field or form, so well, so thoroughly, and so profoundly, and to work with those rules well enough not merely to follow them correctly but to turn them around, inside out, to "delight and surprise," to show their limits by applying them up to and beyond those limits: this is what wit demands. Technologically re-mediated curriculum so far has largely rendered education "witless," by eroding and finally eliminating that playfulness which makes formal schooling an engine of intelligence rather than obedience. Without play, education becomes a force of compliance, not intelligence, and in this sense what we most urgently require of schooling today is that it can once again teach us to play, not to obey.

Then what happens to curriculum when we challenge our most advanced students with tasks that not so long ago appeared in the nursery? When our most serious work looks more and more like child's play, we surely must realize that we have, whether boldly or, rather, without any real comprehension at all, gone where no woman has gone before, because these are highly educated *adults* we are asking to find virtual woodbugs. So what is this digitally (re)mediated transvaluation of epistemic values all about, and, most importantly, where is it taking us?

Where it's been taking some of us working with new media is away from the colonized languages of instruction by which we have been betrayed, away from its schooled articulation, and away from "work," into convergent multimedia, intuitive, embodied competence, and play. Indeed it's possible to see gaming and play as a new paradigm for curriculum research and development. Over the last two years, I have worked in collaboration with Jennifer Jenson on a computer game design and development project, *Ludus Vitae*. Rather than, in good critical spirit, eschewing the commercialization of education, we have set out to embrace what the market can teach us[2]—and what it has been/is "teaching" today's youth: in particular, we have begun to look to commercially produced entertainment-oriented computer games, asking what of educational value we might learn by taking gaming and play seriously.

And so we're asking how the commercially, financially and culturally successful world of electronic gaming might offer important strategies for education. How, for example, do games "teach" their tools and techniques to players by contrast with the ways classroom-based instruction teaches subject-matter knowledge and skills to students?

What we see in commercially produced computer games is an extremely effective programming of learning opportunities which not only bypasses teaching but, more radically, bypasses linguistic articulation altogether. Young players don't need to be told how to play, or what the game is about. They don't need to read about it, they don't need models or examples or mentors, and they certainly don't need teachers. Gaming teaches gamers about itself through immediacy and interactivity rather than display and exposition; its focus is on negotiating an immersive environment rather than on stand-alone task completion. Games use narrative rather than propositional organization, and in game play, activity structures replace epistemic and disciplinary structures. Subject positioning and character formation in game contexts is accomplished through role enactment rather than self-representation, and gaming provides for its players a very different politics of engagement which shifts the experience of locus of control from teacher or educational program ("feedback") to the player ("consequences"). Gaming depends upon even as it also develops lightning speed perception and responsiveness, and it works at a somatic, intuitive, post-articulate level. Finally, by contrast with lessons, games afford players a greatly enhanced quality and kind of freedom: gaming culture encourages and enables solidarity beyond/outside the game (chat rooms, bulletin boards, etc.) *with the player, not the teacher or program, having autonomy* over interaction (degree, kind, with whom, etc.).

The sum of all these elements is a curriculum of playful immersion within an environment that, although much must be learned within and about it in

order for players to succeed, places the player in control of her character and its activities. Gamers navigate through a complex environment in which learning is incidental to and a by-product of their action and interaction *both within the game environment and beyond it* as they participate in chat and help-seeking both on- and off-line to compete, collaborate, communicate and fantasize about the game and their roles in the worlds it makes real, tangible, and even tactile. This phenomenon is sometimes described as "stealth learning," whereby players learn subliminally or incidentally through rule structures, tasks, and activities within the game (Prensky, 2001).

No educational purposes are served by driving a wedge between work and play, learning and pleasure, discipline and passionate intensity. Indeed, a reclamation of the classical connection between "learning" and "playing" is long overdue. The central purpose of curriculum designers, from that standpoint, is to understand what gaming environments have to contribute to digitally mediated educational activity, to harness those capacities, and reorient them to educative ends. But this means far more and other than simply tacking on traditional school-defined learning outcomes to unrelated computer-based stories and puzzles.

We refuse this kind of instrumentalist means-to-ends deployments of gaming resources for learning, which typifies current so-called "educational games." Instead, we see play and learning as mutually constitutive and their conjunction, therefore, as transformative of both. For game play, at its best and most powerful, is engaged seriously, with effort, commitment, and determination, and this, like any serious engagement in learning, affords pleasure, excitement, immersion and playfulness, creating a zone of automaticity, of flow, in which far more is learned than can be written or said about it.

In an article on computer game design, Rieber and Matzko (2000) define "serious play" as "purposeful, or goal oriented, with the person able to modify goals as desired or needed." Most important, they add, "the individual views the experience of serious play as satisfying and rewarding in and of itself and considers the play experience as important as any outcomes produced as a result of it" (p. 16). Serious play, then, is a process of immersion: the players' attention, fully engrossed and absorbed in the activity results in significant learning. As such, serious play and schooling are frequently at odds.

The cultural environment of schools today, in so many ways antithetical to the immersiveness of play, insists on timed activities, with no room for "losing track" of time by being absorbed in reading a book or solving a math problem, on curriculum designed mostly to "survey" a subject area, with little opportunity to study one or two subjects in depth, and with goals and immediate feedback (both punishment and rewards) often withheld from students positioned in institutionally sanctioned power struggles with their teachers.

Educational game development has ignored what commercial gaming exploits, fosters and understands well—that games are fun and engaging because players are not continuously "held back" but instead are encouraged to develop knowledge and skills quickly, learning without being taught, from and within the environment of the game, with success promptly rewarded without being judged. And educational game developers equally ignore the fact that gaming is not a discrete activity or set of activities, but a culture and, for many people, a whole way of life, in just the same way that education—though probably not schooling—can be.

What might it mean to create and sustain an *educational* culture drawing upon the powerful tools of the current culture of commercial gaming?

What if we embarked on the digital re-tooling of curriculum by asking, not how we can include technology as an extrinsic educational component with which to entice and seduce students in order to complete school tasks in no significant way altered by that technology, but how we can devise educative engagements which immerse students in the least pedantic, the most demanding, and the most engaging forms of intelligent participation in fields and forms of human endeavor? First, we might then see just how educational serious play can be. And more profoundly, in pursuing learning activities whose value resides in the engagement itself and not in its extrinsically defined "learning outcomes," we might begin to reclaim from a pervasively commercialized institution of formal schooling, the education it appears increasingly to have abandoned in favor of the development and credentialing of job skills. Ironic and fitting indeed that it should be through play that educational goals might now be recovered and reclaimed.

Notes

[1] The arguments about and examples of game-based learning proposed herre can be followed up in an extended paper, "Serious Play", by Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson, in *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (2003).

[2] Here I'd just like to mark the important distinction between exploring up what the marketplace has to offer to education, and attempting to re-make education as market-based commodity. One seeks to learn from business; the other seeks to become business.

References

Addison, J. (1711, May 11). Wit. *The Spectator*, 62.

Prensky, M. (2001). *Digital game-based learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Reiber, L.P., & Matsko, M.J. (2001). Serious design for serious play in physics. *Educational Technology*, 1, 14–24.

Weil, S. (1942/1970). *First and last notebooks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1948). *Philosophical investigations*. New York: Macmillan.