Ludic Epistemology: What Game-Based Learning Can Teach Curriculum Studies

SUZANNE DE CASTELL
Simon Fraser University

This is a paper about pedagogical connections between games studies and curriculum studies. It is also, a paper written under, and very much in light of, unprecedented conditions of uncertainty. I refer to basic, obvious environmental conditions: ones we in education don't pretend not to see. I hope to make that point salient in what follows.

When writing--or doing most any kind of thing--under conditions of urgency and emergency, things do change. Possibilities, and therefore priorities, alter. Experience transforms. Perceptions shift, values twist. This is by no means a paper about 'emergency', something with which it is very hard to know how to deal responsibly. If not 'about' then, but rather just written *under* conditions of radical uncertainty, it argues for one small way to work with/in such conditions, epistemologically and pedagogically. So this paper's aim is not to integrate new media into conventional approaches to knowledge-building, but to show how games studies, specifically studies of game-based learning, can help to *contest* commonly-received notions of what counts as 'knowledge,' 'truth,' 'facts' and 'evidence.' More and more, social practices at work,

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home, play and school, that have enjoyed relative stability and 'certainty' until just decades ago, are being re-mediated by technologies, which fundamentally displace the (deceptively) monological authority of text.

Issues of knowledge-representation, although they have not (yet) received much attention, are central to an educational understanding of, and to developing educative uses of, digital media. The role and status of the 'virtual' (de Castell and Jenson, 2003), the relative weighting of 'content/information' over 'pedagogy' when education is delivered at a distance (Taylor, 1996), the novel intellectual affordances for teaching and learning which digital toolsets are making thinkable and doable (Murray, 2000) – each of these and more current trajectories of inquiry is helping us to understand the contours of a culturally and historically unprecedented space in which we are challenged to educate, not through coercion, stratification and failure (Illich, 1983), but through volition, engagement, interest and mastery; not through commanding and enforcing learner attention, but by attracting and engaging it.

What educational game studies does for curriculum is to radically stir things up. Its core theoretical project of formulating a "ludic epistemology" can advance epistemic inquiries into media and learning, and respond to what have become quite burning questions for educators about how game-based technologies for learning, and emergent digital epistemologies, reform and reforge relations between learning and play.

"Ludic epistemology" references the need for educational game studies to remediate traditional (linguistically mediated) epistemologies. Its guiding questions are about what it means to encode knowledge in the form of a game, and how we might conceive coming to know as a process of playing. In digital game studies, a theory of ludic epistemology is concerned with the distinctive demands of, and the particular constraints upon, knowledge representation in the development of computer-supported game-based learning

environments. Its primary theoretical questions are about the re-mediation of educational knowledge and its representation.

Regarding curriculum from the standpoint of games studies therefore means thoroughly challenging traditional dichotomies between learning and leisure, between education and entertainment, between work and play. It means re-fusing a distinction, which, historically, is a relative latecomer on the educational scene. Early Greek child-rearing, as we know, took place in gymnasia, where boys played games, and learned to sing, dance, play the lyre, ride on horseback, and have contests of wit, skill and strength--all of which we nowadays classify as play. In Latin, the word *'ludus'* meant both school and game or sport, both learning and play. Why this re-fusal matters for curriculum theory centers on understanding **pleasure** and its importance for deep engagement, and **play**, and its importance for risk-taking, for exceeding one's present accomplishments and prior limits, and for appreciating the role of pleasure and play in intensifying both attention and intelligence.

Having learned to regard learning as labour, a lesson not unconnected to the way school has rendered learning a 'grind' induces, accordingly, suspiciousness of pleasure: 'unauthorized' laughter in class is typically regarded, for example, as a symptom of bad behaviour and a sure sign of being 'off task'. Moving, vocalizing, using one's body, touching others, staring at a page for too long, holding a brush in the air for too long, watching the paint dry… all these are routinely 'corrected' with admonitions to "get back to work". What an enormous loss for education in these admonitions! We probably learn far more about how a child is thinking, and what he or she can do and understand, if we pay close attention, not to how well they attend to and reply to our 'comprehension questions,' but to what and how they are, as we say, 'playing at'.

When education left play behind in favour of scientifically developed, endlessly tried and endlessly tested curricula, it certainly

afforded its administration measurable 'accountability', but lost to teachers and students something of enormous value: the *pleasure* in intellectual engagement, the joy in learning, in producing something that one sees and believes is needed and useful, in pursuing understanding with passion---and the exhilaration we see in fully rapt attention.

A decidedly Rancierean (1991) axiom, formulated after the fashion of Gilbert Ryle (1949), is that *intelligence is adverbial to attention*. We *are* not (more and less) 'intelligent', rather, we DO SOMETHING, for instance we attend to something, intelligently, or not. So reanimated in its grammatical liberation from noun to adverb, intelligence becomes a property of activity. Another way of putting this point is, paraphrasing Eleanor Duckworth, whatever a child is paying attention to (whether or not you think it is important or valuable) THAT is where her intelligence is at work. Duckworth (2006) And intelligence is often most fully and productively at work in play.

Production pedagogy: Playing around with curriculum

For a while now, many university teachers have been disappointed in the routinized, low level, and intellectually thin work students produce in essay assignments. So, in response, it has seemed worthwhile, instead, to try assigning non-text-driven and specifically non-ESSAY-driven assignments, using the unfamiliar tools and grammars afforded by digital technologies. Students are not given many instructions--they are simply asked to build a tool that they can use in their own educational or other work, one that needs to be of use to THEM. Whether in a curriculum course, or a game studies course, or an educational technology course, or a doctoral educational theory course, this approach entails simply requiring the production of a tool, something instrumental with a clear use for its designer. That shifts things, and they shift a LOT. The first thing that happens, of course, is

that students feel overwhelmed by the task, and they continue to feel overwhelmed until they are able to pare down the task to something they can actually achieve. Important pedagogical lesson number one: bring students directly into contact with what they themselves are actually able to accomplish, recognizing both how little that is, and, at the same time, how important and how sufficient that can be. Accordingly, enough with asking the class what they would do if they were in charge of the nation's business, or who they would save if a lifeboat didn't have room for everyone, or how they would set about finding a cure for cancer--we are forever asking students to talk about things they know nothing about, without, however, requiring them to even come to terms with what they would have to know were they to know enough to do what we are asking of them. That we have produced a culture of mini-megalomaniacs is probably obvious from the kinds of public policies we now have, or from the global economic collapse, or from the critical environmental breakdown we have to deal with because people took control over things of whose enormity and complexity they had no understanding. The resurgence of the local in every part of our consciousness is well-served by production pedagogy's way of confronting students with their own limited--but no less educationally fruitful--knowledge and abilities.[1]

Grounding Curriculum Studies

Recall Rousseau's (Rousseau, 1792/1979: 81) disparagement of "Words! Words! Words!" and his call for an education "according to nature". He reminds us to look at nature, and specifically to look at what we know because we see it and live in it, in relation to what we say and hear about it in "words, words, words…". This is particularly challenging under present environmental conditions, but in fact makes clear the deadly seriousness in this paper's call for the resuscitation of 'play' as

inseparable from and indispensable for teaching, learning and the advancement of knowledge under unprecedented conditions of uncertainty.

A curriculum, a course, a 'circuit', is quite literally, grounded. I want to argue that curriculum ought always to be grounded, in 'place', attentive to lived conditions that 'ground' that knowledge of most worth at any given time and place. This critical relation within education's epistemic ecology binds intelligence to environment. How we engage and enact our full intelligence capabilities in the ways we 'take up' and 'occupy' our respective grounds constitutes the condition of our educational 'inhabitation'. What we do and what we do not 'pay attention' to, which is to say, what we do and do not engage intelligently with, will on this view necessarily be grounded in the material conditions of lived actuality--in that extended sense, in 'nature'. The traditional school curriculum, by contrast, has suffered from its obsession with and even pathological addiction to script-driven, language-based representational media, ignoring sound, affect, body, and material environment. It is arguably for this reason that curriculum has been far less a grounded engagement with our world, far more a systematic blindness to and disengagement with it.

Aspiring to build and develop knowledge and understanding, curriculum, whether spiral or, as I see it, mostly circular, has become a kind of 'containment field' invested more in keeping really useful knowledge dispersed than in extending and deepening our knowledge and understanding of the (frankly terrifying) world in which we live. Keeping us all complacent and calm in the face of very well-grounded anxieties, schools notoriously contract, during 'crises', counselors and therapists whose job it is to prevent students from experiencing excessive worry, fear or discomfort. We must educate students without distressing them---but must we? And how is this even thinkable under the present conditions?

Indeed, why wouldn't we, under these dire global conditions, just let children play and enjoy their lives as fully as they can? If that approach to upbringing leaves them ignorant of what schools have been dispensing to students for far too long, is that really a problem, and what kind of problem is it? If we then have to actually confront the levels and kinds of ignorance in which we mostly live our lives, might that not be a first step towards a more attentive, intelligent, informed and engaged form of inhabitation? After all, we actually have to recognize the nature and extent of what we don't know in order to begin to re-mediate education through a meaningful and useful curriculum. As Duckworth reminds us *""The virtues involved in not knowing are the ones that really count in the long run. What you do about what you don't know is, in the final analysis, what determines what you will know"* (Duckworth, 2006, p. 67).

Nine Lessons in Ludic Epistemology

An alternative to pumping more and more 'content' into an already superficial and facile curriculum--life skills, resume writing, professionalism courses--in the fashion of BP's 'heavy mud' and dispersants into the gulf, is instead to reposition serious and demanding intellectual engagement far beyond language and labour, so as to resuscitate play and pleasure as critical curricular elements.

What might this look like and involve? What can curriculum theory learn from games studies about mobilizing a 'ludic epistemology' to re-mediate educational knowledge, especially for youth now confronting an imperiled global environment that they must somehow find a way to inhabit, to salvage and even, perhaps, renew?

By way of conclusion, in place of familiar 'bulleted lists' of 'takeaway lessons', here in the spirit of our times, is a conceptual see-saw with

which to balance a too-literal education in *ludic* directions, more 'poetic' than 'ballistic'. Fill in your own blanks!

Playfulness enables risk-taking. Replay affords 'second chances' and 'trying again'.

Agency develops control and mastery. Embodiment enables multimodal engagement. Pleasure supports motivation and inventiveness. Attention mobilizes intelligence. 'Serious play' and 'hard fun' make for deep learning.

'Engagement'
is connected
to the
experience
of making things
(up).
Flexible and
transferable
skills and
understanding
comprise the only 'education' *worthy* of its name.

Notes

[1] This can be, as Ranciere points out, a position of strength: in relinquishing presumptions of epistemic authority, "the ignorant one can ask anything" (Ranciere, 1969:28).

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