School Structures and Space as an MMORPG Platform and the Question of Violence

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Abstract

Edutainment games, serious games, COTs games and games designed by educators enter the classroom and get integrated in the school curriculum. The latest trend of gamification, which introduces digital ludic elements in formal education, seems to take for granted that school itself lacks any ludic dimension. We examine the possibility of school being seen as a ludic phenomenon, and more precisely as a role playing game platform. Role playing can be met in the school yard, in the class and as a method for teaching and learning. What are the implications that emerge if school is approached as a role playing game? What are the similarities and the differences that may be highlighted by a comparison between the physical school space and MMORPGs space? What discourse is developed and what conclusions are possible? In the paper, we will be addressing school as a (digital) role playing game, an MMORPG specifically. The theme of violence and its forms will be examined and juxtaposed in school and MMORPGs, in order to raise interest for a discussion about potential effective games that will help students and teachers deal with and prevent school violence, which will occupy the new hybrid space emerging between the real and the virtual. The study seeks to retrace, through comparison and analysis, the ethical dimension of the ludic limits of games and to define a more pragmatic approach to gaming and life reality.

1. Introduction

Games are the first educational technique human beings train their offspring with. The double meaning of the word "game" (game as play and game as trophy) conveys the function of games as a primal survival training method [1]. Since the 90's, edutainment, serious games, COTs games and games designed by educators and/or students have entered the school world widely. This trend of digital gamification faced two differing attitudes, one of opposition and another of sympathy and acceptance. The first position held that these games accustom students to ludic stimuli, lead to distancing from physical reality and violence addiction. The second one welcomed digital games as a way to bridge the gap between digital immigrants and natives and foster effective learning [2].
 Although digital games have been thoroughly examined as learning environments, the examination of school space as a ludic one does not appear to receive equal attention. Is there potential for convergence so that a complex, dynamically interconnected educational space may arise?

2. Theoretical framework and reasoning

The need to discuss school in a ludic context comes from the consideration of the conflict between administrative and educational control [3] seen as a form of *agon* (competition) [4]. In order to support our position that school space actually is a ludic space, we drew upon:
 i) Salen's and Zimmerman's definition of game as a system [5]. Building upon their definition, school can be seen an artificially conflict-ridden system (man-made), defined by administrative and educational rules that results majorly in a "quantifiable outcome", measured by grades, reports and exams.
ii) Huizinga's definition of the ludic magic circle [6]. Education taking place in school can be considered as an "act apart". In the secluded school environment, safeguarded by teachers, future citizens get educated while invasions from society's external environment are kept away.
iii) Goffman's frame analysis, as adapted by Fine [7]. In school, there are three layers of reality, the primary framework (the commonsense understandings we have of reality), the second frame, which Fine calls the "game context" and the third, inner frame of make-believe activities. These frames require responding roles, the individual as a role system (reality frame), the gamer role (game frame) and pretense, fictional roles (inner frame). The roles of teacher and student are thought to belong to

the second frame and facilitate learning, whereas subject related and context based roles played in class belong to the third, fantasy frame (i.e. the role of the "inquisitor" and the role of the "investigator" to solve a math problem).

When conflict cannot be regulated through positive play and contest, it breaks through in the form of violence. The consideration of violence as an extreme ludic form follows the paradigm of Nash's P*yramid of Leisure*, according to which "acts performed against society" are classified as "under zero" leisure activities [8]. While games are excellent examples of "upkeying", violence is a "downkeying" phenomenon. It forces individuals to move towards reality [9].

According to a Greek study [10], the ludic dimension of school violence is recognized by a higher percentage (30%) of wiser, older students who state that "violence is a game", whereas the percentage of younger students' believing this drops significantly (13%).

3. School space as ludic space – the event of violence

School space hierarchy traditionally follows a pyramidical structure, with the playground at the base, evolving to the hierarchy of the classrooms, with teaching staff rooms and the head's office on top. Nonetheless, the revolution of small smart devices and omnipresent mobile technology shook cognitive and spatial certainties. Just as students' knowledge of digital media technology surpasses that of their teachers and parents, school space hierarchy can be reconsidered [11].

space	time	type of play-game
Transit spaces, mainly playground	time of arrival at school, before the lessons starts recess time of leaving school	- role conventions - free form play - pretend play - rough and tumble play - functional play (movement) - open space group games - digital gaming (on consoles/mobiles) -conflict/violence
Physical Education spaces (gym, lockers, playing fields)	before and after Physical Education	- role conventions - free form play - pretend play - rough and tumble play - functional play (movement) -conflict/violence
Subject-related spaces, mainly classroom	before teachers enter and after recession signal (i.e. bell) in secret, during lesson time	- role conventions - digital gaming (on consoles/mobiles) - conflict/violence
Staff rooms, head's office	whenever required, embedded in school time or not	- role conventions of game frame (teacher, student, head - grades, organization, rule-keeping, behaviour rewards or punishments. In general, a violence-free zone

Table1. School space-time-type of play/game correlation

School space comprises subject-related and transit spaces. Subject-related spaces include classrooms, gyms, laboratories, playing fields, school theatres, design workshops etc. Transit spaces include stairs, corridors, cafeterias, recreation rooms, bathrooms and playground. Parallel to school space evolves subject-related and transit school time. The former is usually spent in subject-related spaces, the latter in transit spaces.

The most relevant study we encountered that sheds light upon the connection between school space and violence took place at a U.S. "alternative school" (attended by children who have committed serious violations of school rules) [12].

As school violence we define actions such as rough physical play that loses its keying, offensive touching, challenges (physical or nonverbal gestures), verbal teasing and insults, offensive requests,

backbiting, accusations of wrongdoing, threats of physical harm, psychological/physical abuse (i.e. sexual), crimes, bullying and cyberbullying. Another layer of ludicity is added on top of school spaces and times, that offered by mobile technology. This ludic layer contains pervasive forms of digital violence with effects in the physical school world.

Although subject-related spaces may host violent events, violence is expected to occur mostly in transit spaces i.e. corridors, where there is little control over students. The same is expected about transit time i.e. recess or when leaving school. But, there are indications classroom violence may need to receive attention [13]. In table 1, we correlate school space, time and type of play/game (including violence).

4. MMORPGs as ludic space – the event of violence

Digital games are said to be allegories of space [14]. Although space itself can be an enemy, we tend to move from "oppressive dungeons and space stations" to "vast landscapes without clear perceptions and actions in advance" [15]. MMORPGs spatial representations have been classified as i) open landscape and closed labyrinths [16] ii) zones of city (settlement), wilderness and quest [17]. Each zone affords particular configurations of actions. Cities or settlements are generally considered "safe". Wild areas are transit routes to safeholds and quests. Quests, being spaces apart from actions, are areas dedicated to "objective driven game-play". They can occur in cities, wilderness or secluded areas of the wild, open-air or dungeon-like. Although the gameworlds of MMORPGs are three dimensional, they are usually accompanied by two dimensional maps and some sort of inventory, a remediated version of the tabletop RPGs "character sheet", in which character properties are managed and accessible during gameplay.

As digital game violence we define a series of actions taking place between players and/or characters. "Physical" violence in digital games represents physical violence and is keyed to the fictional world during gameplay. But, verbal violence may occur between players *and* between characters. Such forms of violence include offensive requests, non-playful insults, verbal teasing, accusations of wrongdoing, threats of harm and swearing. To this list we may add verbal sexual abuse.

In our MMORPGs spatial analysis (Table 2), Aarseth's and Oliver's digital games space categories are combined and approached in line with gameplay time phases and "types of play-game". *World of Warcraft* has been taken as an MMORPG paradigm. Role conventions, functional play (movement) and socializing as player and/or as character-metaplay are common and possible at all spaces and during all phases of gameplay. They are not mentioned in the table, they are highlighted here instead.

5. Comparative analysis of school and ludic space in terms of violence occurence

In this section, we will attempt to briefly correlate school and MMORPGs spaces as sets for events of violence (Table 3). Although, in spatial terms, the playground could be considered as belonging to the "safehold" category, it is not safe at all, as forms of physical and verbal violence occur regularly. This is the reason we support safeholds corresponding to staff rooms, head's office, and maybe, classrooms. Playgrounds, stairs, corridors and halls are transit spaces in between classes, so they can be considered as "wilderness", either as open space and/or closed labyrinths. The link between quests and doors as well as their inherent experiential learning context brings them close to subject related spaces, i.e. classrooms, laboratories, library and the gym. The 2D nature of the inventory/map page evokes school marks and report pages given at the end of each semester and the end of the school year.

MMORPGs space	MMORPGs time	MMORPGs type of play-game
Safeholds (cities, towns, villages, settlements)	- before and after gameplay in quests and wilderness - periodically during quests - when escaping from dangerous situations - after fighting, for energy replenishment - when upgrading weaponry and armory - when easy transport to other map areas is needed - after death, automatically transferred to restart	- buying/selling/exchanging equipment, resources, materials - training (for battle, in various techniques i.e. fishing) - finding out about quests - NPCs commission quests - strategy (i.e. planning, mostly between players) - conflict/violence (mostly verbal, player vs player)
Wilderness (open	- in the move from safeholds to quests	- solitary/cooperative

air transit routes, closed labyrinths)	- when quests are embedded in wilderness - while gathering resources	game/battle against entities -NPCs commission quests - useful object finding for quests - gathering resources - strategy - conflict/violence
Quests (areas for objective-driven play, i.e. dungeons, raid spaces, arena, battlegrounds)	- when targeted as part of character upgrading - when discovered and accomplished in wilderness situations or parallel micro-worlds	- solitary/cooperative game/battle against entities, with treasures/experience points rewards - strategy - conflict/violence
Inventory/ map page	- whenever organization or revision of skills is required - whenever a strategic route to quests is required - accessible at all times for character-management and the shaping of geographical strategy	- strategy - organization - reward (upgrading) and punishment (loss of points, change in levels e.t.c.) - Mapping of leveling areas indicating suitable quests

Table 2. MMORPGs space-time-type of play/game correlation

SCHOOL SPACE	MMORPGs SPACES
Staff rooms, head's office, classrooms	Safeholds (cities, towns, settlements)
Playground, corridors, school entrance, around school, cafeteria, school hall, stairs, school bus, playing fields, recreation room, bathroom	Wilderness (open air transit routes, closed labyrinths)
Subject-related spaces i.e. classrooms and laboratories, library. For Physical Education playground, playing fields and gym	Quests (behind doors or not)
Marks/school report page (*eleghos* in Greek means control)	Inventory/map page

Table 3. Comparison between school and MMORPGs spaces

6. Discussion

There appears to be tremendous potential in discussing school and MMORPGs as correlating ludic spaces and phenomena. With the boundaries of reality blurred by digital gaming's pervasiveness, a dynamic approach that takes into consideration the learning dimension of gaming as well as the ludic dimension of learning may explain otherwise incomprehensible cases of school violence and serve well in violence prevention/management and strategic planning in terms of school management, curriculum and architecture. Digital RPGs are theatrical/performative phenomena that may be integrated in Drama classes [18]. By combining digital MMORPG character animation and physical embodiment techniques familiar in Drama, violence can be explored through empathetic and spectator routes which may enrich students' violence prevention and management skills. Further research is needed for methodological convergence between school/MMORPGs, in accordance with the physical school and digital gaming space fusion. This new hybrid space emerging between the real and the virtual could be explored as the basis for fostering effective learning and behaviour strategies through gaming.

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