Mario from Super Mario in Kindergarten

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Abstract

Visiting a kindergarten, the author seeks to learn more about the daily activities with a focus on early literacy. Literacy is a composite competence «involving skills to create understanding by help of various signs and modalities» [author's own translation] [1]. A multi modal text includes at least two modalities, and in this case study Peder delivers by combining drawing and oral presentation. Meet Peder: He is 5 ½ years old and attends a kindergarten where the children love to draw and convey what they draw. Peder has drawn the digital game Super Mario where there are numerous tasks and challenges Mario needs to navigate to get to the next level. Media and digital games have become a large part of the lives of numerous children, and a number of studies have been carried out looking into how they are affected [2]. To Peder, his drawing was near equal to playing the game itself, spending a long time both drawing and telling what he had drawn. «You may keep the drawing and take it home with you and learn more, and also play", he said [3]. Peder shows his conveying competence through images and symbols when he interprets his own drawing, and anticipates his visitor will be able to decode the multimodal text in line with his intentions. The context for this case study is a socio-cultural view of learning where «knowledge is constructed through interaction with others in various social contexts». [author's own translation] [4]. The aim of this study is to learn more about children's literacy through Peder's multi modal text about Mario; how a child's digital play may be an entry to literacy.

Keywords: *kindergarten, multimodal texts, digital games, early literacy*

Introduction

This case study is about five-and-a-half-year-old Peder who attends a kindergarten in a small town in Northern Norway. During a drawing session, Peder drew Mario from the digital game Super Mario, at the same time as he commented and narrated. Media and digital games have become a large part of children's lives, and a number of studies have been carried out on how this affects them [2]. Norwegian researcher Joakim Langfjæran uses the term "play" to refer to playing digital games, "... it is an activity separated from everyday life that intensively absorbs the player in a magical circle" [author's own translation] [5]. Norwegian children will be introduced to digital tools in the kindergarten, and the Norwegian *Framework Plan for Kindergartens* states that "Digital practices in kindergarten shall encourage the children to play, be creative and learn." [6]. This case study is also about children's literacy or knowledge of the written language through multimodal texts. A multimodal text consists of at least two different modalities or ways of expressing oneself, for example by image, music, dance, video, oral, or written text. The focus for this study is "How can a child's digital play be an introduction to literacy?"

Peder's name is fictive, and his parents have given their consent to use his drawing.

Illustration: The game Super Mario as Peder presented it.

Design and Method

The starting point for this case study is a socio-cultural view of learning, that "knowledge is constructed through interaction with others in different social contexts." [author's own translation] [4]. Children learn from being in social interaction with other children and adults. For the researcher who wishes to learn more about children's interests, play and culture, the kindergarten will be arguably a good learning arena. It is about being present and being open to what happens, when it happens, and writing down what is interesting there and then [7]. In this context, the role of participant observer was chosen. As a researcher, it is a goal to be objective, which is something that may be difficult in such a role. One has a tendency to always want to bring oneself into the situation, meaning one's own background, education, thoughts, and attitudes. The questions one asks and the comments one gives along the way will help shape the situation [7]. The researcher is aware of this and makes his or her reservations.

Literacy is a composite competence that "involves skills in creating meaning using different signs and different modalities." [author's own translation] [1]. It "is about language development, about being able to interpret and understand text, and to communicate both in writing and orally" [author's own translation] [8]. In order to understand stories and children's multimodal texts, narratology is a good tool. "A narrative can be defined as a course of events with a beginning and an end, as a bounded temporal sequence." [author's own translation] [9], though the child's stories will often lack the basic structure and dynamic development [10]. Participating in a drawing session as an observer can be a good way to gain a better insight into children's multimodal texts and early literacy [1].

Peder and Mario

One of the adults in the kindergarten had provided the children with drawing utensils, and the children could draw freely. Peder chose to draw Mario and the game about him. Mario is the protagonist in the digital game Super Mario from Nintendo [11]. While the drawing was developing, Peder talked about it and thus he produced a multimodal text. He was engrossed in what he was doing and was not too concerned with whether anyone was following what he was saying, he was in a state which Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi calls *flow* [12].

Being able to read is about being able to decode and understand encoded signs, and one must be able to understand that the individual graphemes or letters correspond to a phoneme or a sound, and that the phonemes together create a word. One must also understand the semantics of the word or words in the text. Norwegian professor Bente E. Hagtvet [13] writes that some children learn to write without being able to read what they have written themselves. She tells of the boy who, when asked if he could read what he had written himself, replied "I can't read - just write!" [author's own translation] [13]. With this in mind, would Peder remember his story? To find an answer to that, Peder was asked to talk about what he had drawn the day after the drawing session; and here follows his narrative:

> There is Mario. There is a locked door. There you see a round window with the moon. It is the moon that shines. There's Bom Bom. We have to jump on Bom Bom's head three times. And then there is lava below. We have to press that ax there. There is a room where there are lots of things, but it is difficult to find the key. There is a Bowser. There are several Bowsers here, there are two pieces that have been hiding somewhere. And then there are many question marks. You see, we have to do some tasks to get the key to unlock the door. (Short pause) You may keep the drawing and take it home with you and learn more, and also play. It's a game. [3]

Peder was able to decode and create an understanding of his own drawing. The drawing is simple, and the oral narrative alone is referential, but together they create a dynamic narrative. In the centre of the drawing you can see the moon, and the yellow below is the lava. It gives the impression that here it is night, perhaps dark, and it is dangerous; if one takes a wrong step one end up in the lava flow. Mario is on the far left in the drawing, and he is easily recognizable by his characteristic moustache. He looks straight at the viewer while smiling widely; he is ready to move further into the drawing, in the direction of reading to solve the tasks that fly around. On the opposite side is Bowser, the antagonist and arch-rival of Mario [11]. Bowser has also got the features that are characteristic of the digital game: an animal snout with many large teeth and spikes on his back. He has his gaze turned to the left, perhaps he is scouting for Mario. Bom Bom (or Bob Omb) hovers directly above Mario, and he has the slightly innocent expression from the game. Knowing what the individual objects in the drawing are supposed to be, one sees them clearly. The tiny door that will get bigger when Mario moves closer, the axe, the key, and all the lines that indicate question marks. When Peder uses drawing to convey a message, it shows that he has learned something fundamental about the value of a multimodal text.

Writing is about understanding the connection between phonemes and graphemes, and in addition one must have a message one wishes to convey [14]. British professors Kate Pahl and Jennifer Roswell point out how "literacy is always shaped by the social context in which it occurs" [15]. Literacy in school and home are different. They claim that "the motivation to write is clearer when placed in an everyday context" and present the theory of Artifactual Literacies. Artefacts or objects have an important role in most people's lives, they are material, and they represent culture. For a child an artefact could be a motivating force in writing. The tangible objects have a story to tell [15]. Peder brought a cultural experience with him from home, where the computer game about Mario is the artefact that initiates a process for him. He has a message he wants to convey and through drawing he encodes it on the sheet of paper. "You may keep the drawing and take it home with you and learn more, and also play", he said [3]. He expected that others would be able to "read" his drawing and understand more of what he wanted to convey through it.

Digital Play and Digital Tools

Digital play is an activity that does not quite fit in with what is stated in the framework plan about digital tools. According to the Norwegian *Framework plan for Kindergartens,* the staff must "exercise sound digital judgement", they must "actively involved with the children when using digital tools", and then "digital tools must be used with care and not become a dominant practice" [6]. It should be considered a tool, not a game. Norwegian senior researcher Beate Wold Hygen from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology has been researching children, young people, and digital games for a number of years. She points to the many existing negative associations with digital games:

> Concerns about aggression, over-gaming, reversed circadian rhythms, addiction, weakened social skills and poor physical fitness gnaw at many parents and often become a source of conflict in the home (author's translation) [2].

Hygen also calls for research that looks at the possible benefits of computer gaming [2]. Children do not play to learn, but that does not mean they don't learn anything from playing. The same can be said about computer games; children do not play them to learn, but that does not say that learning does not take place, rather the opposite [5].

It is easy to consider digital games as meaningless because one has not learned to read computer games. To understand digital games, you need a new type of literacy where you interpret signs, pictures, and other visual symbols [5]. This is a literacy Peder might have expertise in. "It's a game," said Peder about his drawing [3]. Drawing the game was more than a visual representation of a digital game for Peder, it was just as good as playing the game itself.

Conclusive Comments

In developing literacy, it is important to be able to decode and understand signs, and it is also important to understand why one reads. To be able to write, one needs something to write about, a message. Peder wishes to convey a story about the computer game he likes, for which he uses drawing as a medium. The various symbols in his drawing have a meaning, and if one knows the game, one recognizes them and can interpret them. Peder shows knowledge of how to read a computer game, and he can convey a message through pictures or signs. Through digital play he has received an important knowledge he can bring with him and develop further when he learns to convey a message using letters for encoding.

Digital games are part of children's interests, play and culture. What is needed is further research on computer gaming and digital literacy to learn more about the possible benefits of playing.

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