Grand Theft South Africa’: Games, literacy and inequality in consumer childhoods

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Discussions of ‘game literacy’ focus on the informal learning and literacies associated with games but seldom address the diversity in young people’s gaming practices, and the highly differentiated technologies of digital gaming in use. We use available survey data to show how, in South Africa, income inequalities influence consumption patterns, shaping experiences of digital games. Two case studies of young people’s play practices involving digital games in Cape Town suggest the fragmentation and inequalities of contemporary play practices and the need for a more inclusive understanding of digital gaming. Mobile phones offer more accessibility than other digital gaming platforms and local appropriations include display of micro-commodities, concealment of outdated technology, control strategies and deletion of functionality. Digital games articulate between multiple overlapping communicative spaces and hence complex cultural articulations arise when global game narratives are appropriated to make sense of racial otherness, crime and politics in South Africa. Since educational curricula cater for highly fractured publics, we ask whether it is advisable to speak of ‘game literacy’. We suggest the need to validate less strongly mediatised forms of play, and to address diverse identification practices in consumer culture, including prestige and status as well as othering and shame.

Keywords: game literacy; multiliteracies; play; mobile games; appropriation; domestication

Introduction

Globally, digital games are an increasingly important part of consumer culture for children and young people and involve a highly differentiated range of consumer electronics platforms. Apart from consoles and desktop computers, a wide range of mobile devices are now used for gaming, including cheap basic phones, feature phones, netbooks, handheld consoles, smartphones, high-end tablets and laptops. Game scholars increasingly acknowledge the diverse and socially situated nature of gaming (Beavis, et al, 2005; Carr et al., 2005; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Sefton-Green, 2006; Buckingham, 2006; Burn, 2007; Pelletier, 2009; Crawford, 2012), although only a few studies have pursued the implications of differential access to digital games and platforms from a global perspective (e.g. Kolko & Putnam, 2009). Scholars have recognized the informal learning and literacies associated with games (Sefton-Green, 2006; Gee, 2003, 2004, 2005; Steinkuehler, 2008). This
recognition has coincided with calls for the development of ‘game literacy’, including dimensions such as the study, critique and design of games, multimodality, virtuosity in play, and systemic thinking (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Burn, 2008; Burn, 2009; Squire, 2008; Zimmerman, 2009).

 Responding to such calls in a South African context requires consideration of three distinct issues: gaming infrastructures, strength of mediatisation, and assumptions about play as progress.

 First, calls for ‘games literacy’ in marginal contexts can productively explore differences brought about by inequalities in access and the appropriation of infrastructures for digital gaming. Such infrastructures are likely to be invisible in more affluent contexts than this, and particularly so in societies with large middle classes, or where lower income groups are more likely to own gaming consoles (Facer & Furlong, 2001).

 Second, everyday playground practices in South Africa involve ‘multiliteracies’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) or the use of semiotic modes such as music, dance, gesture, and multilingual communication in games (Prinsloo, 2004; Janks, 2006; Stein, 2008; Harrop-Allin, 2011a, b). ‘Game literacy’ is not an entirely good fit to describe such play practices, which centre around embodied performance and props such as makeshift skipping ropes made from nylon stockings (Prinsloo, 2004). By contrast, game ‘literacy’ is associated with commodified (digital) games and visual narrative. Infrastructures of electricity, connectivity and devices form necessary interfaces to these strongly ‘mediatised’ (Hjarvard, 2004:48, 114) play practices, while weaker or indirect forms of mediatisation characterise everyday playground performance.

 Third, calls for ‘game literacy’, like many accounts of learning in games (Pelletier, 2009), gain their persuasive force from progress rhetoric (Sutton-Smith, 1997:11), or a notion of play as developmental, cognitive, productive, literate. Many dimensions of play are difficult to reconcile with ‘progress’: play can be frivolous, cruel, repetitive, compulsory, and is widely used to enforce hierarchical distinctions (Sutton-Smith, 1997:111).

 This paper addresses some of these thorny questions about play and digital games in South Africa. We explore meanings of the initial and ongoing expenditures associated with commodified gaming, including the purchase of a phone, computer, or console, strategies for managing ongoing costs of prepaid airtime or electricity in household economies, and the significance of upgrading and replacement of platforms and commercial game content for middle class households. We find that consumption of digital games mark class and gender differences and that appropriations include responses such as shame and self-denial as well as enhanced prestige or creative self-expression. Finally, by investigating young people’s interpretation of globally disseminated game narratives we explore the interaction between game tropes and local ‘othering’ practices.

 Class and cultural consumption in South Africa

 South Africans encounter digital games in the context of an unequal and fragmented consumer culture, characterised by sharp inequalities in income and access to consumer goods, the internet and electrification.
Middle class households in South Africa include only a relatively small elite in the highest income categories (Seekings & Nattrass, 2006). Most white households fall in this bracket (Figure 1), while the median incomes for black households are close to the poverty line (AMPS, 2011).

Appropriation and domestication

In South Africa as in other contexts, households negotiate the meanings of media technologies (such as television, personal computers, or digital games), both as objects and as media carrying semiotic messages, in a process known as ‘domestication’ (Silverstone et al, 1992:17) where technologies link the ‘public’ sphere and the household and its ‘private’ spaces and meanings. In this study, we use a broader concept of appropriation of technologies to express the mobility of technologies and their multiple articulations between overlapping communicative spaces (Keane, 1995) in a context of North-South interactions (Sahlins 1993, Hahn, 2004, Schoon, 2012).

Gaming technologies articulate between multiple social contexts for children and young people, connecting global media, national broadcasters, households, classrooms, playgrounds and peer groups. As commodities they link market exchange values with the ‘moral economy’ of households (Silverstone et al, 1992:17). They also articulate with alternative currencies such as airtime or in-game currencies, and with the values of consumer culture in specific gendered peer groups.

Methodology

We present ongoing research from two different studies with young people from Cape Town. The first involved Marion Walton in in-depth interviews with a group of Grade 11 students in Makhaza, Khayelitsha. This group of older teens (ages 17-19) shared...
their strategies for appropriating digital games despite an aggressively fortified wall of costs – computers, broadband, and relatively expensive phones and airtime. In the second study, Nicola Pallitt conducted classroom-based workshops at a suburban boys’ primary school in Cape Town with classes in Grades 6 and 7 where these younger children discussed their experiences of a strongly mediatised digital play culture.

All names of participants have been changed to protect the identity of participants.

*Makhaza teens*

The first study took place against the background of a larger survey (N=441) which investigated cellphone and mobile media use (Kreutzer, 2009). The in-depth interviews in Makhaza were conducted with seven Grade 11 students (ages 16–21) who also participated in Kreutzer’s survey (Walton and Kreutzer, 2009).

Khayelitsha is a large generally low-income urban settlement on the urban periphery of Cape Town. Its history of spatial and racial segregation, political struggle and economic disadvantage still characterises the area today. The participants attended after-school classes with a local NGO and volunteered for artifact walkthroughs of their cell phones, where they talked about how they used their phones for gaming, to store media and for mobile instant messaging (IM) and Internet use.

*Suburban boys*

The second study was conducted as a pilot for Pallitt’s doctoral research (Pallitt, forthcoming) at a primary school for boys in suburban Cape Town. A total of 103 boys (aged between 11 and 13 years) participated in the study, including one Grade 6 class and four Grade 7 classes. The participants mostly lived in the affluent suburbs surrounding the school. A handful lived in former coloured townships, and one was from Khayelitsha (formerly a black township). Thus while the school had been racially ‘integrated’, the feeder area for the school made it a largely middle class enclave. The students completed a short two-page questionnaire and worksheet on their access to digital games during an Arts and Culture lesson at school. The Arts and Culture teacher designed a follow-up lesson where, in line with a curricular emphasis validating African cultural expression, he assigned a creative task where the students were to work in groups to discuss the shortage of South African games and to develop their own concept (in writing) for a South African game.

*Young people, digital games and play in South Africa*

In this section we contextualise our relatively small-scale studies of digital gaming practices with data from the South African Advertising Research Foundation’s AMPS survey to illustrate how post-apartheid income inequalities influence consumption patterns, and thus shape South African experiences of digital games.
Access to gaming platforms is strongly associated with household income (Figure 2, AMPS2011). Almost half the population have negligible home access to computers, while Sony PlayStations are only owned by the highest income groups. Cellphones are the only relatively accessible gaming platform.
Figure 3: Daily gameplay on cellphones and playstations by age group and gender

Daily digital gaming in South Africa takes place on cellphones rather than on PlayStations or computers (Figure 3), although the preference for cellphones is only evident in the younger age groups (AMPS2011). Older age groups (35+) are no more likely to be involved in daily digital gaming on their phones than they are on computers or consoles. Young men in the lower age groups (15-24) are somewhat more likely to play games daily than young women in the same age groups, and this gender difference is more marked for PlayStations than for cellphones.

**Phendu and Andile**

Of the seven students interviewed, Phendu (18, m) and Andile (18, m) had the most marginal relationships to consumer culture. They were able to appropriate games as relatively non-commodified features of their phones, but the limited functionality and symbolic meanings of their handsets created certain difficulties for their relationships with peers.

Phendu and his family lived in an informal settlement in Makhaza, in a one-room shack without electricity. His constrained circumstances are suggested by the fact that his family did not own a radio. If he wanted to listen to music, he needed to stand outside his home, close to the neighbour’s shack to hear their radio. His phone was an ultrabasic model designed by Nokia for use in developing countries. It did not
have any of the data capabilities he badly wanted: ‘no MXit, no Internet, it’s just for receiving [calls and messages]’. His ‘Sent Messages’ folder on the handset was empty, as he did not have enough money to buy airtime to send text messages.

Games were Phendu’s favourite feature on his phone, because they were free. He enjoyed the two preinstalled games on his Nokia, particularly *Snake Xenzia*. *Snake Xenzia* is a version of Nokia’s adaptation of the arcade classic, *Snake*. Although he demonstrated considerable skill with the game, his high score was not very high. Although he enjoyed playing games, he had rationed playtime to fifteen minute periods to avoid running down the battery of his phone unnecessarily. His family did not have electricity and if he charged the phone at a shop he would have to pay a premium for the service. If he conserved the battery he could charge it at a friend’s home.

Use of the phone’s commodified features and of its games were curtailed because Phendu ‘incorporated’ (Silverstone et al, 1992) the handset into everyday cost-saving practices, effectively redesigning the capabilities of the phone in accordance with the economy of his household.

Andile (18, m) also played a version of *Snake* (*Snake III*) every evening. His phone was even more basic than Phendu’s, a battered Nokia 1100, with a monochrome screen and few features. Andile’s family circumstances were also financially constrained. His mother supported him on whatever she was able to earn as a domestic worker for a cleaning services company.

Games were Andile’s favourite feature on the phone, “Wow, it’s the only thing that I like on my phone”. The old handset and its monophonic ringtones testified to his family’s poverty, subjecting him to ridicule by peers. He explained his strategies for concealing the outmoded phone and its giveaway sound effects. He created a profile which set the phone to ‘vibrate’ on incoming calls, since the ringtones shamed him in public, as did the sound effects of his games: “When I’m in front of many people, I just put [the sound] off”. This surreptitious use of the phone was an attempt to allow the phone to define his relationships with his peers.

Andile and Phendu thus struggled with a number of troubling articulations: the consumertist moral economy of their peers, the lack of electrification in informal settlements, the high price of prepaid airtime in South Africa and the relentless movement of global fashions and innovations in the mobile communication industry. Their strategies of concealment and self-denial need to be considered along with the stories of virtuousity or creativity detailed in studies of young people’s ‘game literacy’ (e.g. Burn, 2008).

**Mobile gaming**

Andile and Phendu’s stories reveal the reach of mobile games, which come pre-installed on even the most basic handsets, such as the Nokia 1100, and which can be used without spending airtime. In a survey of 422 Grade 11 students from low income areas in Cape Town (Kreutzer, 2009), almost all (94%) reported that they had played games on their cellphone, 43% saying that it was their most frequent activity on their phone. According to this survey, 57% of males and 40% of females played daily.

Kreutzer (2009) reports that the most popular mobile games were free pre-installed games such as *Snake*. Participants also listed hundreds of low-cost titles. These can be downloaded for a few rand from WAP sites or copied via Bluetooth. Many of these downloads were masculine gendered titles such as football (31%) and
car racing (12%) games, although arcade-style classics such as Pacman (14%) were also popular. Over a third (35%) of participants in Kreutzer’s survey had shared a game via Bluetooth on the previous day.

Gaming is thus a popular local appropriation of mobile phones. Mobile games are micro-commodities, affordable even within a tight budget. Unlike expensive console games, they do not require specialised hardware or negotiations with other household members around priorities for space and household finance. Most interviewees were wise to commercial stratagems which could entangle them in unwanted subscriptions that ‘stole’ their prepaid airtime. They knew where to find free or relatively cheap game downloads which accommodated their constrained household and individual budgets.

Most mobile games were single player arcade-style games, but they were used in multiplayer contests between collocated peers who competed informally over displays of virtuosity or fashionable, expensive or new games. In such conversions, games articulated strongly with hegemonic masculine identities and interests, such as football and cars.

**Deleted games**

As discussed above, many younger women play mobile games (Figure 2). Unfortunately this study did not achieve any in-depth knowledge of young women’s mobile gaming practices, since only two women volunteered for interviews (Sandisiwe, 18, f and Phindiwe, 17, f). As it turned out, both had, in fact, deleted all the games off their phones, ‘sacrificing’ them to make space for more valued media associated with their relationships with boyfriends. Even the limited resources required for mobile gaming were too much for these participants.

Phindiwe had wanted to free up memory on her phone to store mp3 music files, while Sandisiwe had needed space to store fifty two treasured SMS messages from her boyfriend. The limited resources of memory on their handsets required careful maintenance, and was appropriated to cherish memories of intimate romantic relationships.

Households as spatially bounded places are key to young people’s negotiation of meanings, but they are not the only or a singular factor. Games were points of articulation which connected young people’s management of digital artefacts on their phones with various circles of peers, whether positively by confirming young men’s membership of gender-specific interest communities or negatively by freeing phone memory to support young women’s intimate romantic relationships. We also found that many digital play practices of this group of young people centred around the spaces for peer interaction associated with a popular mobile messaging application known as MXit.

**Collecting games**

Local instant messaging application and content platform MXit received 19% of mentions as a favourite ‘game’ in Kreuter’s (2009) survey. The classification of MXit as a ‘game’ was also echoed in interviews where phrasing such as ‘play MXit’ (Mncedisi, m, 19) or ‘play on MXit’ (Sicelo, m 18) was used. Calling MXit a ‘game’ or an enjoyable and perhaps frivolous diversion reveals the classificatory principles informing young people’s appropriation of this application.
MXit was considered a game for many reasons – it is used for multiplayer games such as chess and is often displayed in the ‘games’ folder of phones. Some popular MXit ‘games’ were not digital games at all, but rather playful social interactions or ruses where MXit acted as the conduit for interactions with peers. For example, Phindiwe had passed on her boyfriend’s MXit contact details to a female friend who contacted him using a pseudonym, and without revealing her real identity. This friend had then flirted with Phindiwe’s boyfriend via MXit chats, in order to test his commitment to his relationship with Phindiwe. Phindiwe and her friend had conspired together ‘to see if he is a liar or just faithful’. Such ruses and games with identity were common uses of MXit, as was extensive linguistic and orthographic play.

MXit contact lists were also used in an informal collecting game where young people competed with one another to build large ‘empires’ (Mncedisi, m, 19) or collections of MXit contacts. Mncedisi (m, 19) and Sicelo (m, 18) took this game particularly seriously. Both had feature phones with cameras, internet access, and Bluetooth capabilities considered enviable by many of their friends. They gained influence by displaying their collections of contacts to collocated peers, and allowing others to observe their chats. As social gatekeepers they brokered new connections, and ‘shared’ or ‘traded’ their abundance of contacts with other friends. This game of conspicuous consumption of social capital had rules, and the consequences of cheating (by ‘stealing’ contacts without the phone owner’s permission) could be serious.

Both Mncedisi and Sicelo’s MXit contacts had been ‘stolen’ off their phones in processes that involved varying levels of overt aggression and subterfuge. The practices of ‘stealing contacts’ involved picking up someone’s phone without their permission and copying contact details from the MXit contact list. This disrespected the friend’s role as gatekeeper or matchmaker and potentially also offended the ‘stolen’ contact whose privacy had been violated by a request to chat from a stranger. Such thefts were also discussed as an ongoing ‘vendetta’ where MXit contacts were raided from unattended or shared handsets in retribution for previous raids: Mbulelo (male, 18) reported that he had decided to steal contacts from his friends out of revenge ‘they were stealing from me too, and I was doing vendetta’.

These examples suggest how MXit as digital object was used to network between different circles of peers. MXit was both a public or semi-public interface for displaying reified collections of ‘contacts’ to collocated peers, as well as an intimate channel used to maintain close and often playful relationships with online friends.

Middle class gaming in the suburbs

The second case study for discussion in this paper took place 35km from Makhaza at a boys’ primary school in Rondebosch, one of Cape Town’s tree-lined southern suburbs. While the secondary schools of the teens in Khayelitsha did not charge more than R250 ($33) per annum in school fees, fees at the suburban primary school were almost a hundred times higher, at R20 500 ($2678) per annum.

The younger boys who attended this suburban boys’ school had a far more intensively mediatised play experience than their older peers from Khayelitsha. Their access to digital games at home far exceeded the modest national averages seen in the AMPS data. For boys in this school, computers and PlayStation consoles were the medium of choice for play within a primarily male peer group, which also extended online. Of the boys who completed Pallitt’s questionnaire, 80% reported playing...
games at home on the computer, 51% on a laptop (owner not specified), 76% reported playing games on the Internet and 68% played on a PlayStation.

Gaming was a predominantly masculine activity, taking place mostly within the peer group. The boys reported playing mostly with their school friends (81%), cousins (49%), brothers (43%), and other friends who did not attend the same school (58%). Several (20%) reported playing games with strangers on the Internet. While only 6% played with their mothers, 22% played games with their fathers. The ‘favourite’ games they mentioned had distinctly masculine themes, such as sports games or, as a rebellious alternative, the gangster-themed Grand Theft Auto (GTA) titles.

In Rondebosch, as in Makhaza, access to and knowledge about digital games was an important resource for performing social distinctions before peers. In Makhaza feature phones and downloadable games as micro-commodities could be converted to gain ‘bragging rights’ with peers. In Rondebosch we encountered a different economy where ownership of and knowledge about expensive gaming consoles and their latest game releases had currency. PlayStation 3 owners were granted high status and deemed particularly lucky compared to the majority who played games on desktop computers or a PlayStation 2. One even claimed to have a ‘PlayStation 4’ in order to impress. Age-restricted games or new releases were more highly valued, and, in questionnaire responses many listed FIFA 10 (a new release at the time) as their ‘favourite’ game. They were also likely to write down the full names of game titles, in order distinguish a game from earlier releases or prequels with the same title. Others used full titles to distinguish between games with similar titles but different age ratings.

**Game design concepts**

Students were asked to work in groups of three to four to develop a written concept describing a ‘South African game’. One group submitted a rough sketch along with their concept.

All groups used the strategy of ‘localising’ digital games with which they were familiar, rather than digitising a local playground game. Most groups used one of the games they had mentioned as ‘favourites’ in the previous lesson as a starting point (FIFA 10 and the GTA series), localising the game through the use of South African public figures as protagonists, adding local musical genres (kwaito, struggle songs) and place names such as Khayelitsha, Robben Island or Johannesburg, while one featured a single use of Afrikaans (Kaaps) in the title, ‘Jou ma se FIFA 10’ (Your mother’s FIFA10).

The majority (ten) of the concepts they created approached the South African localisation through satire or parodies, in many cases political parodies which revealed considerable knowledge of local political scandals and which were somewhat disconnected from more patriotic varieties of South African national identity. The students’ local appropriations of the criminal stereotypes in GTA are of particular interest, given the prevalence of crime in South African society, the racial dimensions of South African politics and political allegiances, and the potentially explosive and hurtful impact of racial and political stereotyping in the ‘aggressive assimilationism’ which characterises many middle class South African classrooms (Soudien, 2004).
A rough sketch depicted the protagonist of this game as a shack dweller, carrying a machine gun, crouched next to a fire in patched clothing, smoking, against a background of shacks. The backstory links South Africa’s hosting of the FIFA Football World Cup in 2010 with the social problems of gangsterism:

A child grows up around sex, drugs, soccer, gangs, and violence in a squatter [informal settlement]. And in this year 2010 he can finally fulfil his dream of becoming a soccer player but he has to overcome the gang problems inside his hometown.

The title of the game references the non-standard dialect of Afrikaans known as Kaaps which is associated with coloured identity. The title switches the trademark FIFA 10 for the gendered insult “Jou ma se poes” (your mother’s cunt).

The concept is explained as a hybrid of two favourite genres: “If GTA and FIFA 10 met this would be the game”. The authors of this game concept included both white and coloured boys and the game title’s initial indexing of racial and linguistic identity or stereotypes of coloured gangsters are not developed. Instead, the concept shifts to a preoccupation with class. The class ‘other’ lives in poverty in an informal settlement, imagined through the lens of GTA’s criminal underworld of gangs, violence, drugs and sex.

Grand Theft South Africa

The game ‘Grand Theft South Africa’ offered players a choice of three political protagonists. Starting in the Cape, they could play as Nelson Mandela, in ‘Kayalitsha’ (sic), they could be Julius Malema (then leader of the ANC Youth League), in Johannesburg, they would play as Jacob Zuma. The action of the game was an amorphous mix of criminally inspired game mechanics and a caricature of a lawless, narcotized ghetto environment: “Kill, steal, rape, grow up with alc[alcohol] and drugs”. The player’s goals are listed as to “become president”, “take control” and “corrupt SA”. Rape does not feature in GTA’s underworld, and thus the inclusion of rape as a game mechanic may allude to the rape trial in which Jacob Zuma was acquitted. The overall game goal of corrupting South Africa probably refers to the corruption charges which were dropped against Zuma in 2009.

JZ’s revenge

Another group developed a political concept satirising the story of Jacob Zuma’s rise to power. In this game, entitled ‘JZ’s revenge’, the player takes on the role of Jacob Zuma, carrying an AK47 in a ‘3rd person shooter’, a mechanic inspired by Zuma’s rallying song, ‘Awuleth’ Umshini Wami’ (a struggle song which translates as ‘Bring me my machine gun’). This song became associated with Zuma during protracted court battles, and his faction’s bid for control of the ANC.
The game features Zuma using his AK47 to kill political opponents as well as Democratic Alliance (DA) members. (The DA is the country’s largely white-dominated official opposition, which won 96% of the vote in this suburban ward.)

GTA’s pedestrian roadkill is given a satirical slant, with dead citizens providing a source of income for the player as “JZ”: “Civilians you kill – taxpayers’ money”. The authors note that “JZ’s revenge” is a “very sexually active game”, and polygamy provides a central game mechanic for ‘levelling up’: “More wives – higher level”.

GTA ANC Wars

“GTA ANC Wars” is a similar concept, outlined as follows:

“You were raised in a rural area. You have the knowledge, you have the power, the skills, you have … the machine gun. With the ANC behind your back you must corrupt the area and become president of SA.”

This group found ways of translating the sequence of public scandals associated with Zuma into various game mechanics such as mini games and outruns:

Play the mini games such as how much kids you can have in a year, the machine gun outrun, the most expensive party and roam through the area of South Africa, make crime … or stop it, kill people or have a lot of wives… you can do what you want … because you are … Jacob Zuma.

Racial tropes in GTA

Textual scholars such as Leonard (2006) have challenged game studies to account for racial ideologies in games, suggesting that many game stereotypes support the ‘hegemonic racial order’. Games such as as GTA are seen as interactive equivalents of Blaxploitation movies, glamorizing violence and making young black bodies ‘disposable’ (Barrett, 2006:95) while extreme racialized tropes contribute to their shock value (Leonard, 2006).

Other scholars have claimed that GTA games should be read as satires and offer a range of potential meanings or resources for meaning construction (DeVane and Squire, 2008). The younger African Americans they interviewed about playing GTA connected with Hip hop and car customisation, while older African Americans read aspects of the game as a critique of poverty and police racism. Young white gamers used the game as a kind of ‘fantastical escape from the suburbs’ (Squire, 2008:641) and read it as a social satire rather than taking its negative racial stereotypes at face value.

In the game concepts discussed above, the key localisation strategy was to use game genres in combination with media stories about crime or the misdeeds of public figures to construct a social satire of South African life. This created the parodic effect of using public figures such as President Jacob Zuma as anti-hero of a gangster narrative, referencing various scandals involving corruption charges and a rape trial.
Games and public discourse

The game concepts create alignments between communicative circles which might not otherwise be seen to overlap – global gangster narratives, political news and opinion in national newspapers or broadcasts and informal political analysis or discourse about race, violence, class and crime. Commercial games thus articulate a perhaps unexpected link to political public discourse and can play a powerful role in shaping young people’s relationships with others.

Overall, the effect is a cynical satire of South Africa as a criminally dystopian ‘imagined community’ (Andersen, 1991). Although not framed in explicitly racial terms, the game concepts reveal an uneasy set of racial associations and othering strategies. Racial terms are taboo but racialised identities are nonetheless indexed through language, music, and references to the African National Congress, and to places such as Khayelitsha and ‘rural areas’. Some concepts connect poverty, township and rural life with images of crime, sexual promiscuity, drugs and game versions of gangsterism, focusing suburban ideologies through the jaundiced lens of GTA.

The game concepts also achieve humour by reversing suburban values in the way they splice local media coverage of politics into the narrative structures and antihero plots provided by hyperviolent gangster movie and game genres. While Jacob Zuma’s political power is satirised as illegitimate and morally corrupt, as antihero he becomes (for some at least) a playable identity of enviable lawlessness, freedom and jovial masculine appeal.

Fuelled by the sometimes racialised and class hostility toward Zuma prevalent in the media and in their everyday environment, some satires may also reveal an underlying sense that power in South Africa has been ‘stolen’ — perhaps not at the end of apartheid in 1994, but certainly in 2007 when Jacob Zuma was elected to lead the ANC.

The teacher was surprised by the cynicism of the concepts, the potential for racism or other classroom conflict in the exercise, and the distance between his lesson and the goals of the Arts and Culture curriculum. GTA was a far cry from the skipping games featured in the curriculum in order to validate indigenous cultural practices, ‘promote nation-building’ and develop respect for ‘human value and dignity’ (Department of Education, 2002).

Further research

These two studies are suggestive but inconclusive on many important issues that they raise. Some possible questions might include systematic comparisons between these two sites, and between them and other contexts; the nature of girls’ and young women’s play practices and experiences of gaming, and how mobile gamers respond to more strongly narrativised game genres.

We can elaborate only briefly on some of many curricular questions we have raised. The two studies we discuss foreground the challenging politics that arise when formal education and national curricula serve highly unequal societies, deal with unevenly distributed infrastructure, and cater for fractured publics sharing few common communicative spaces. Key educational strategies to investigate might include encouraging inclusivity by exploring how both narrativised games and games as micro-commodities are woven into diverse identification practices and how
changing fashions in games and platforms are made meaningful in local peer economies of prestige, status and shame.

Conclusion

The two studies reported in this paper reveal mediatised play in both contexts, with arcade-style cellphone games and collecting games dominating the ecology in Makhaza while more expensive consoles and highly narrativised genres were ubiquitous in the suburban school.

Although methodologically direct comparisons are not possible, differences between and within the cases suggest caution in adopting a generational rhetoric (Buckingham, 2000, 2007) which sees young people as having a natural affinity for technology and games. This can too easily reinforce the stigma of consumer culture and penalise young people like Phendu whose limited resources curtail participation in gaming, or like Sandisiwe, who opt out. They also suggest that, when validating young peoples’s knowledge of games, we need to acknowledge weaker forms of mediatised play (such as the contests over MXit contacts) as well as the strongly mediatised variants in digital games We believe that such more inclusive approaches may want to dispense with the term ‘game literacy’. Our reasons for this are threefold.

First, the term ‘literacy’ (even in its broadest sense) emphasizes knowledge of strongly mediatised games and so is likely to erase the connections between play as embodied performance and games in general. Second, the normative implications of the term literacy are likely to encourage a bias in favour of hegemonic versions of digital gaming, which are often inflected by a particular white male technicity (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). Middle class practices might ‘count’ as game literacy but the knowledge required to play MXit games in Makhaza might not. Finally, the term ‘literacy’ includes the implicit claim of the permanent value and potentially transformative use of skills or understanding (Sefton-Green, 2006:255). Such claims of the transformative power of games as a form of literacy are strongly aligned with the ‘rhetoric of progress’. We have shown that this rhetoric is not adequate to explain the role of games as commodities maintaining and reproducing class distinctions and social hierarchisation or to challenge the gendered identification processes and othering we have documented.

While this paper argues that it is important to study emergent forms of digital gaming in marginal contexts, it is equally a call for a broader definition of games, gaming, and play. This would acknowledge that the games and play of many young people are not necessarily mediatised, narrativised or digital. Neither are they easily subsumed into the projects of educational curricula.

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