



Electronic Games: What kind of curriculum is that?

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The subject of my current research work is related to the study of "cultural curriculum"¹ in terms of sound and image, and its correlative in the formative experience lived by young people and mediated by electronic games. Its objective is to analyse cultural curriculum in what concerns the information mediated by sounds and images in the screens of electronic games and the appropriation and production of meanings carried out by young people² in the outskirts of João Pessoa City.

We are living in an audio-visual society, a sound/image narrative that includes what has become known as cultural curriculum or, in other words, a more or less organised set of values and data that, via cultural products (in this case, of an audio-visual nature), intersperse the daily lives of millions of people, interfering in their ways of learning, seeing, thinking and feeling. One wonders: what emerging kinds of knowledge permeate that space?

The Audio-visual Society: a scenario of emerging knowledge

Over the last decades of the 20th century, countries like France, England and the United States have conceded public financing to ever-broader studies (on various subjects and in different disciplines) in important research centres³, with the aim of understanding not only the nature of the relationships that develop between audio-visual artefacts and their spectators, but also the socio-political impact such relationships can produce. John Willinsky (1998) alleges that the construction of the differences that divide the world is part of the legacy of the Western cultural and intellectual Empire, a work in progress where education holds pride of place. Still according to this author, audio-visual artefacts help compose the identities of people and groups, as part of a cultural and political strategy that divides the world.

In Brazil, even though a tradition of research on that subject does not yet exist, several initiatives towards it are being carried out in graduation and post-graduation programs of education and communication at faculties like USP, among others. This kind of research has increasingly demonstrated that it is impossible to understand how audio-visual work without analysing the relationship different social groups and agents entertain with the cultural atmosphere that envelops them, especially in terms of the massive production of images and sounds.

The curriculum of electronic games does not impose itself. People come and adhere to it for reasons of personal interest and delight. The games' colours, pictures and movement fascinate young people, who sit for hours on end with their attention held, yielding to their charm, modelling their subjectivity and acquiring knowledge that is turned into a curriculum more powerful than school's. But how are parents and teachers looking at these new kinds of knowledge? According to Steinberg (1997, p. 140), the advent of electronic hyper-reality has revolutionised the ways in



which knowledge is produced in the culture of learning, "and the ways in which children come to learn about the world. Fathers, mothers and teachers must analyse the nature of that revolution and its role in forming identity".

About that, a mother has said: "besides all the problems I already got, my children live inside those playgames⁴; I don't know how to stop them. Their teacher complains because they miss classes"⁵. Such words allow us to understand that electronic games are being seen as an enemy. According to Vorraber (2002, p. 81), "more important than discovering the enemy is understanding its logic". That shows how urgent it is to research the interaction between young people and audio-visual artefacts, as well as the kind of knowledge such an environment produces, in order to find answers to questions like: What knowledge do they produce? What meanings do they appropriate? What do they think, and why do they think so, in those environments of images and sound conveyed by electronic machines?

Electronic Games: a mediation of knowledge

Even though human has always been mediated through the socialising process and language, it was only in modern times, with the emergence of its typical mass media (first printed, then electronic) that an enormous increase in the mediation of the experience that attends such forms of communication became apparent. According to Giddens (1997, p. 22), both printed and electronic media act as "modes of reorganising space and time; more than just reflecting realities, they also shape them in a way". Interaction between a young person and an electronic artefact takes place straightforwardly in space and time, allowing for interactivity and motivation, indispensable conditions for drawing attention to the artefact's images and sound.

The increasing degree of ordinariness of such perceptive connections shows how close, disturbing and probably pleasurable human/machine interactions are becoming. It is within this scenario that more and more children and young persons construct their perceptions of the world, their identities and subjectivities. They are constituting themselves, not only as subjects of power/knowledge relationships, but also as objects of the power relationships that circulate through and with the machine. Is it possible that, within these power relationships, young people can be autonomous in their learning?

According to Gonsalves (2002, p. 72), "to be autonomous is to be able to elaborate one's own laws, to understand the connections taking place inside one's own thought"⁶. To be autonomous is to be a student in paradise, searching one's inner rooms for significant findings. Hence the notion that every young person is a case in her/himself, with his/her own appropriation and production of meanings (Gonsalves, p. 73): "individuals, as organisations, are their own product, that is to say, they are both the producers and the product of the knowledge process".

In modern society, knowledge is a priceless commodity⁷. According to Maturana and Varela (1995, p. 18), we can only know human knowledge (experiences, perceptions) from within itself. In other words, to know is a self-organising process of the individual, that is to say, each one learns through and in the relationships he/she develops with her/his environment. According to Levy (2000, p. 121), "each



time a human being organises or reorganises his/her relationship with her/himself, with other humans, with things, with signs, with the cosmos, he/she becomes involved in an activity of knowledge, of learning". This leads us to advocate that in the relationship between young people and electronic games, a production of knowledge takes place, which is mediated by the technology and reaches its subject, the young player. There is an interactivity between the idea conveyed by images and sounds and the technology that generates them.

In these game environments, young people contact with simulation techniques, interactive images that, in Levy's words (2000, p. 165), "while not replacing human reasoning, prolong and transform our capacity of imagination and thought". Quoting Assmann (1998), "we reconstruct our image of reality on top of what reaches us from outside". According to Castells, every cultural expression, from worst to best, from elitist to popular, can be found in that digital universe that unites, in a gigantic historical super-text, all past, present and future manifestations of the communicative mind. With that, writes Castells, "they build a new symbolic environment, that turns virtuality into our reality" (2001, p. 395). In his reflections, Stuart Hall (1997) has repeatedly warned us of how important it is that we deal with the "cultural sphere" in our researches. At the centre of this issue, according to him, "lies the relationship between culture and power. The more important – more 'central' – culture becomes, the more significant are the forces that rule, mould and regulate it" (p. 40).

Thus, I advocate in this work that a cultural curriculum exists and that the appropriation and production of meanings by young people through the sounds and images on the screen of electronic games leads them to perceive such meanings as natural. Audio-visual messages exert a huge fascination, which leads young people to rely on the power of the machine and to believe that machines reflect reality, all of which gives images a high degree of credibility and legitimacy, thus influencing the formation of young persons' identities.

Final Consideration

There is no need to see electronic games as either bad or good, but it is essential to approach them with theoretical tools that will allow us to see them as one of the forms in which the cultural curriculum of our time expresses itself, as a set of texts that must be read, examined and discussed in terms of what they produce in societies and in what concerns their role in the very construction of the contemporary individual. According to Fleuri, it is all a matter of keeping an eye open for the obvious, admiring everyday facts while distancing ourselves in order to develop a critical stance, as well as the capacity for orienting our actions.



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Notes

¹ Guacira Louro develops the concept of 'cultural curriculum', while discussing the effects of so-called 'cinema pedagogy', in his essay "Cinema como Pedagogia". See Louro et al. (org.), *500 Anos de Educação no Brasil*, BH: Autêntica, 2000.

² In this study, I will resort to the concept of youth used by UNESCO. See <http://www.unesco.org/>



³ Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris II, Paris X – Nanterre, Paris VIII – Saint Denis, Rutgers University, New York University, University of Brunel's Centre for Research into Innovation Culture and Technology, among others.

⁴ In this project, the terms playgames, electronic games, game machines, playtimes, electronic machines will be used as synonyms. The accuracy of the terminology will be taken in account during the development of the thesis.

⁵ Statements by mothers and one grandmother, taped during research for the dissertation, in 1999.

⁶ Meireles, Cecília, *Flor de Poemas*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1986.

⁷ *Livro Verde para a Sociedade da Informação em Portugal*. Lisbon: Iniciativa Nacional para a Sociedade da Informação, undated.