Research questions the educational possibilities of some TV and computer games

April 4 2011

There is a considerable amount of interest among researchers, educationalists and from the games industry in the educational possibilities offered by video and computer games. Some of the arguments about this educational potential are about so called open-ended games, games where the players set their own goals or plans and chooses which way the game goes. Now a thesis from the University of Gothenburg reveals that as a mean to challenge pupils' ideas and values, then these open-ended games are not appropriate.

Previous research has suggested that circular games with open ends, known as open-ended or sandbox games, can support exploratory learning in which players can explore the game content in such a way that they learn about a specific content or phenomenon while playing.

But the characteristics attributed to this type of game are seldom backed up by empirical research. Drawing on observations of play activities recorded on video, Louise Peterson shows how meaning and values are negotiated during actual game play.

Previous research draws attention to the progressive potential of this game genre. However Peterson argues that the relative "freedom" afforded young people as they play within open-ended game worlds can actually reproduce, rather than disrupt, pre-vailing norms and values. This because the players proved to be using their sociocultural experiences – what they already know – as a resource in their play activity.

This suggests that the educational potential of games might not be in exploring, but rather in the fact that rule-based activities make players orientate themselves to specific topics. Hence, open-ended exploration within immersive game worlds might not be an appropriate way to challenge young people's preconceptions and stereotypes.

Gaming is also a diversified practice. When the player himself sets up plans and goals, the results will be different and it is difficult for an educationalist to gain an overview of how learning objectives are met. From an educational perspective, the use of this type of game is an uncertain activity and the thesis shows that open-ended and free exploration of game content is not the best way of teaching with regard to norms and values. Louise Peterson's research provides an educational perspective as to how to study players using computer games, i.e. the actual playing activity.

"We need to have an understanding of this type of game and the terms of game activity such as this before we use it in teaching," she says.

Provided by University of Gothenburg