Identities, Genre and Design in Game-Making

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Games can, as discussed by different scholarship (Bogost 2007; Flanagan 2009; Anthropy 2012), communicate values and messages in diverse ways. Anthropy (2012), for example, argues that games can be personal, and that creators can use them to communicate their values, beliefs and share their experiences. In this sense, the production of games on the margins of the industry, such as those developed in game-making clubs targeted at young people, can lead to a process closely connected to identity formation and cultural perspectives.

When making games, young people can bring into their design their own cultural preferences and experiences, articulating specific social positions that they want to occupy and showing them to others, while also rejecting those that they do not want to claim allegiance to. Therefore, if we consider identities not as a static, inner core of the self, but fluid, temporary constructs that are socially and politically negotiated to make our discourses intelligible to the Other (Hall 2000; Shaw 2014), designing a game can be seen as a good opportunity to experiment with and choose from different discourses and identities.

However, this process of identity construction is not only dependent on cultural elements: we cannot overlook games' specific language and the existence of a "traditional digital gaming culture" that shapes gaming ecology (Kafai et al. 2015). Ignoring certain conventions from this "culture" might ignite controversies about what is accepted as a game – as the debate around whether First-Person Walkers can be defined as games showed recently (Muscat et al. 2016). Some of these conventions can be read through the lens of genre – "the codified usage of particular mechanics and game design patterns to express a range of intended play experiences" (Arsenault 2009) – and although genres are socially constructed and in perpetual evolution, they are the basis for the establishment of a distinction among different games (Goddard et al. 2017), which might be a direct factor influencing personal game-making. Additionally, a similar challenge when promoting personal game-making activities might arise from the technical domain, especially if the middleware used to support the activities already incorporates some of these conventions,

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favouring specific aesthetics and game mechanics. In this sense, are these already incorporated conventions a hindrance on identity work through game production?

The main aims of this work are to explore in which ways game-making activities can promote identity expression and how do game design conventions affect this process. By understanding how young people deal with different cultural influences and organise the available semiotic resources while producing their own digital games, I will explore what kind of identities can be claimed by young people in game-making contexts, how do these identities resonate in their games and how these productions can be read, both in relation to the broader game production and as a personal statement.

In order to investigate this topic, I will bring results from two different game-making after-school clubs organised and offered to young people in London/UK (one at a community-led centre focused on Latin America migrants, and the other at a primary school). The programme consists of a series of workshops offered in a weekly basis, totalising 10 hours of instruction/production for each cohort. The participants were aged between 11 and 18, and produced 11 games in total across the two sites.

To make their games, participants used *MissionMaker*, a software that allows non-specialists to create their digital games using ready-made 3D assets and simplified drop-down-lists based on scripting language. A character designer module was also available to students, allowing them to produce different characters – playable or NPCs – to be later added to their games. Participants were able not only to re-signify the ready-made assets, code, and use their own characters, but also to produce different semiotic resources through audio (voice files or music) and static images.

Qualitative multimodal analysis (Kress 2010; Pérez-Latorre et al. 2017) of preliminary results show a great influence of popular culture in participants' design: game themes varied significantly among the proposals, often reflecting the difference in the designers' media/cultural preferences, signalling how they would like to be "read" by others. In this sense, custom characters, as similarly identified by previous research (Kafai et al. 2010; Gee 2003), and game thematics were used by some of them as cultural statements, in a type of identity work to be read as a curatorship of the self (Potter et al. 2017). Some of these cultural identities also impacted on technical aspects of the game-making process, since participants that played adventure games often showed a better fluency on designing and constructing their games, similar to what other research (Buckingham et al. 2007; Zagal 2010) has shown about gaming literacy and the connection between playing, interpreting and making games.

A second aspect singled out by these results is a compromise among genre conventions, available resources and participants ideas and identities. Initial designs tended to be too ambitious and often closer to other cultural forms (e.g. films, novels), but throughout the project students started to adapt their own ideas due to software and time constraints, albeit frequently maintaining their own distinctive design features. In this process, participants showed that even if it is possible to represent and claim specific identities through game-making, the influence of genre and technical norms cannot be ignored: the use of *MissionMaker*, which embodies some of these design conventions (e.g. combats are easier to be programmed than dialogue trees) was a constraint that often led students' design to specific directions. Nevertheless, some imaginative and non-traditional designs were also created, very often by participants that played games that do not fit into *MissionMaker*'s adventure genre.

This insight is relevant to further research on the interaction between personal preferences and cultural and technical constrains on game-making, especially in terms of innovation and appropriation of specific semiotic resources, as well as to the mapping of the influence of genre(s) and gaming repertoire in game-making contexts.

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