Reflexivity, methodology and contexts in participatory digital media research: making games with Latin American youth in London

Bruno de Paula

Published online: 17 Mar 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

Article views: 993

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles ⬚

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Reflexivity, methodology and contexts in participatory digital media research: making games with Latin American youth in London

Bruno de Paula ⓘ

Culture Communication and Media, University College London Institute of Education, London, UK

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I intend to explore the role played by reflexivity in grounding a more critical perspective when designing, implementing and analysing participatory digital media research. To carry out this methodological reflection, I will present and discuss a recently concluded research project on young people's game-making in an after-school programme targeting Latin American migrants in London/UK. I will pay special attention to how my subjectivities influenced planning, data generation and analysis of this programme, and to how context, lived experiences, curricular decisions and interpersonal relationships shaped the kinds of knowledge produced through this research. Findings emerging from this experience included relevant dissonances between curricular design/decisions and the use of participatory approaches in game-making, and the limitations of traditional analytical categories within the Social Sciences field (e.g., gender and intersectionality) to understanding subjectivities expressed through game-making. This study offers relevant insights into the place of reflexivity in research on digital media production by young people by highlighting its complexity and by calling for more critical and less homogenising approaches to this type of research.

Introduction

Several authors highlight the value of digital media production for young people (Cannon, Potter, and Burn 2018; Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020), remarking how these wide range of activities can foster different competences such as critical thinking, agency, civic participation (Dahya 2017), and technical skills (Denner, Werner, and Ortiz 2012; Kafai and Burke 2016). Media production initiatives are often grounded on democratic ideals, having at their core the goal of encouraging the participation of people who are perceived as marginalised (Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher 2014; Ahn et al. 2014), promoting a more levelled field towards participation in contemporary cultures (Kafai and Burke 2016). This is the case of digital games, an area known by its exclusionary nature (Kafai and Burke 2016; Shaw 2014) and where interventionist game-making initiatives (Peppler and Kafai 2007; Kafai and Burke 2016) – often informed by feminist methodologies (Jenson, Fisher, and de Castell 2011; Harvey and Fisher 2016) – have been employed to challenge this reality. One of the goals of these game-making initiatives is to foster a deeper level of critical engagement with digital games, challenging existing conventions and naturalisations within the field and in how games are perceived in contemporary cultures (Jenson, Fisher, and de Castell 2011).

CONTACT Bruno de Paula ✉ bruno.depaula@ucl.ac.uk 🖃 UCL Knowledge Lab, 23-29 Emerald St, Holborn, London WC1N 3QS, UK

This does not mean, however, that youth digital media production initiatives are a panacea for empowering young people. Different authors (Willett 2016; Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020) discuss how youth media production can be easily co-opted by a neoliberal agenda, both in formal and informal settings. Taking the 'maker movement' (Anderson 2013) as an example, Vossoughi, Hooper, and Escudé (2016) argue that discourses around youth making activities (e.g., game production) can reify those ideals promoted by hegemonic capitalism such as an acritical focus on technological innovation, entrepreneurship and the development of workforce skills perceived as valuable (e.g., programming).

Nevertheless, youth digital media production initiatives do not need to subscribe to these neoliberal narratives of emancipation (Dussel and Dahya 2017). In this sense, Parry, Howard, and Penfold (2020) argue that it is only through research-informed approaches that digital media production pedagogies can disrupt hegemonic, individualistic neoliberal discourses. The challenge here is that these media production spaces, even if framed as counterhegemonic (cf. Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020), are still enmeshed in the very same power structures that constitutes hegemony (Harvey and Fisher 2016). This means that corporate values can find their ways into 'open' and 'freer' media production spaces, especially if there are pedagogical components, such as supporting a group of novice media producers, involved. Practical and methodological decisions, such as the software employed, the selection and order of topics discussed with participants, and criteria adopted for media production can reproduce conventional views about gaming, jarring against the democratic ethos of youth media production initiatives.

To explore possible ways of overcoming this challenge, avoiding the reification of conventional/hegemonic ideas, and affording a more critical perspective on youth digital media production, in this paper I turn to 'researcher reflexivity' (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2017; Berger 2015; Taylor 2018). Acknowledging our positionings and the role played by methodological decisions – and the possible limitations emerging from these – can help us researchers to move beyond a merely celebratory perspective about youth digital media production. These reflections allow us to both scrutinise the kinds of knowledge produced around these game-making spaces, and to reflect about our own social roles as facilitators: are we, no matter how good our intentions are, reproducing the same hegemonic powers we aim to disrupt (Harvey and Fisher 2016)?

To reflect about these tensions between practitioner/researcher positionings, pluralistic ideals, and pragmatic curricular and pedagogical decisions, here I carry out a retrospective analysis – a reflection on action (Schön 1991) – of a game-making club for young Latin American migrants in London/UK. Using *Extrovertido* – a game produced by two young women – as a case, I discuss the complexity involved in the construction of game-making spaces, focusing on how research design decisions – such as software selection for game production and the use of arbitrary criteria to organise participants' design process – and my own positionings (a male Latino) played a crucial shaping role in the game-making club and, consequently in the knowledges produced through it. By carrying out this retrospective reflection, acknowledging the power exerted by me as a researcher in this situation, I aim to examine how some apparently productive (or pragmatic) pedagogical and methodological decisions to foster game production in this non-professional context jarred against the non-hegemonic ethos of youth digital media production activities, favouring, for instance, normative notions of gaming centred around masculinity (Taylor 2018).

The present paper, therefore, is structured in this form: in the following section, I turn to reflexivity and the role of the researcher, discussing how this practice will be approached in this paper. Later, I move onto youth media production initiatives, with a special attention on how these spaces have been employed in order to promote inclusion, and how we (as researchers/practitioners) often fail to address power relations and the kinds of knowledges/claims that can be constructed through these initiatives. After these considerations, I introduce the context where the game-making club was organised and discuss what prompted this reflective exercise. Finally, I revisit the game-making club, examining how different research decisions, assumptions and positionings constructed a specific scenario that prompted the game-makers to respond in certain ways. With this reflective

exercise, I intend to bring into discussion the challenges implicated in this kind of work and the importance of a reflexive approach to youth media production initiatives.

Reflexivity, objectivity and role of the researcher

Different authors have discussed the influence of the researcher in the process of knowledge production, rejecting objectivity (Lammes 2007; Berger 2015; Corlett and Mavin 2018). Reflexivity, 'the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome' (Berger 2015, 220), has then been pointed out as one way of rejecting objectivity and acknowledging the relationship between researcher and knowledge produced. By making visible these links among researcher, object of study and the knowledge produced, reflexivity is recognised as a marker of academic rigour for qualitative research (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2017).

These ties between reflexivity and rigour in the context of game studies are outlined, for example, by Lammes (2007). By assuming our own positionings in relation to our object of study, we can generate a more reliable account of the knowledge that we can produce through our research practices, recognising every analysis as partial, fragmented, and incapable of accounting for all links among researcher (in her case, the videogame player), object of study (the game that is being played) and (gaming) culture (Lammes 2007).

Reflexivity becomes even more important when we incorporate other actors in research or, in a game-bound example, when we move from game analysis to research about gaming communities and practices. In these settings, as researchers, we have a responsibility towards our participants, since our own positionings will mediate what kind of knowledge we can produce and how these participants will be 'depicted' through our investigation. Even if specific methodologies, such as digital media production, allow participants to 'write themselves' (Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020) into media products, there is still a layer of translation between actual artefacts or practices produced by participants and what is written about it through data analysis.

These considerations around researcher-participant ties, data generation and analysis open a pathway to a crucial discussion in social research: the so-called 'insider-outsider' dichotomy. This dichotomy refers to the position assumed by the researcher in relation to the researched group and is directly linked to the researcher's lived experience (Berger 2015). Being hailed as an 'insider' – as someone who had/has similar experiences to the researched group – might afford a closer relationship with research participants, lowering possible barriers and allowing these participants to 'open up' more easily (Berger 2015). It can also give the researcher a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied, allowing insights into how to identify meaningful data that an 'outsider' may not be able to recognise (Berger 2015).

On the other hand, an insider position can also obscure meanings, since it can create a situation where the researcher projects her own experiences into participants' experiences, using it as an 'universal' element to interpret the phenomenon being investigated (Berger 2015). Reflexivity, by promoting this continuous process of scrutinising one's own positionings in relation to the topic being investigated, as well as how these positionings affect the research and the knowledge produced from it, can help researchers to avoid these pitfalls and build a reliable and ethically responsible study (Berger 2015; Corlett and Mavin 2018).

This does not mean, however, that a reflexive approach to research is easily carried out. Our positionings are not always clear-cut, creating complex research scenarios, and different authors (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2017; Taylor 2018) remarked how the proximity to the object of study or different, contradictory positionings might complicate the research process. For example, in a retrospective reflection about his research on offline competitive gaming, Nick Taylor (2018) highlights the tensions between being a white male doing research on male-dominated communities and a researcher trained on feminist ethnographic methodologies. To the participants involved in his research, Taylor was perceived as an insider – a White, male and reasonably competent player

studying competitive gaming – which afforded him an easier way 'into' the researched group. Nevertheless, his own identification as a feminist culminated in significant issues during data generation, illustrated by his brief example of the (sexual) objectification of a female model by the research participants in the gaming event he was attending (Taylor 2018).

Taylor's work is important because it deals with more specific issues around research with specific groups, such as 'questions of complicity, considerations around whether and how to disguise one's commitments to ideals that might run contrary to those of the study participants' (Taylor 2018, 24). His reflections point out how working through these tensions might create productive methodological understandings about the nature and the possibilities of research around videogame culture. These understandings include not only the kinds of knowledge that can be produced through ethnographic methods such as observation, but also how the processes adopted in this specific line of inquiry might direct male-identified game researchers to 'wittingly or not, help re-entrench any of the multiple forms of social exclusion associated with games, by participating unreflexively in exclusionary legacies of game-related cultural production' (Taylor 2018, 12).

As a way out for this methodological conundrum – the naturalisation of the same exclusionary conditions associated to maleness in digital gaming – Taylor invokes the 'cyborg' (Haraway 2000). As a hybrid (in Taylor's case, part 'bro', part feminist), the cyborg affords a positioning that breaks the insider-outsider dichotomy, being at the same time capable of accessing and operating within the masculine world of hegemonic gaming and to 'problematize the very material-discursive conditions which make such domination persist' (Taylor 2018, 25).

While grounded on the central role that masculinity plays in gaming culture, Taylor's use of the cyborg to describe the relationship between researcher and what is being researched can be extended to other situations. Carr (2019, 11) reminds us that 'lived experience, including, for instance, experiences relating to class, migration, gender, ethnicity, family, work, technology, and disability […] will generate particular kinds of knowledge', or, to use Taylor's (2018) term, will influence what kind of media instrument a researcher can be.

Here, it is clear how the researcher's own positionings and her own lived experiences are influential in her practice: from the kind of data she has access to, to the kind of analysis that is pursued and the knowledge that is produced, these procedures are always mediated by who the researcher 'is'.

This acknowledgement of the researcher's position and its implications to knowledge production is not without its pitfalls: as discussed by Littler (2005, 245), reflexivity can culminate in an overtly atomised, narcissistic individualist position, as if it were the result of an individualised process and the knowledges constructed from 'expressions of the 'experience' which emerge from the 'self' [were] somehow of greater validity than other discourses'. To avoid this pitfall, Littler (2005, 245) follows Haraway's (1997/2018) call to '[think] reflexive positionality and knowledge-production as relational and temporal processes, and as imbricated in complex, contingent conjunctures, distributions, systems and networks of power'. Reflexivity, therefore, should never be seen as an individualised practice detached from the social dimensions in which we (researchers, researched, and the phenomena we are investigating) are inserted in.

This understanding foregrounds the importance of approaching reflexivity as a social, rather than an individualised, practice. It also remarks the importance of the context where the research is carried out, including here power relations between researcher and participants. These will be explored further in the next section in relation to digital game-making activities

Juggling research and pedagogy: research, everyday activities and power relations

Since the turn of the century, digital game-making with youth has been successfully explored by different authors (Peppler and Kafai 2007; Denner, Bean, and Martinez 2009; Kafai and Burke 2016) as means to achieve different goals, from fostering computational thinking and programming

skills (Denner, Werner, and Ortiz 2012) to widening the interests and participation of minorities in certain areas (Ahn et al. 2014). Digital game-making, however, is a complex and demanding initiative. This complexity is related not only to 'practical' aspects, such as access to equipment and resources, but also to pedagogical, methodological and epistemological ones: Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher (2014), for example, highlight how the un(der)reporting of resources involved in the establishment of media production initiatives – especially in terms of time and effort of facilitators and others involved – can culminate in misconceptions towards these practices. These misconceptions can culminate in a celebratory perspective, as if media production initiatives were an easy solution to complex issues around participation and inclusion, for example.

To avoid this celebratory stance, we must reflect about power relations involved not only in the research process (e.g., writing up) but also in the space where the investigation is conducted, including the researcher's possible authoritative position (Dahya 2017; Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher 2014). Often aligned with broader discourses around democratisation and diversification of gaming and game production (Jenson, Fisher, and de Castell 2011), game-making clubs for young people usually spawn from more hierarchical structures, such as after-class clubs in schools (Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher 2014; Jenson, Fisher, and de Castell 2011; Denner, Bean, and Martinez 2009) and might reproduce – even if in a lesser degree – the same institutional culture and similar inter-personal dynamics (Dahya and Jenson 2015). Moreover, we cannot ignore other elements that play a significant role in shaping how research is carried out and framed, such as technologies, personal preferences, particular understandings about media and broader sociocultural and political elements (Dussel and Dahya 2017).

Investigating these contexts then means dealing with multiple tensions, from issues of power relations between researcher, participants and institutions to the aforementioned 'practical' pedagogical aspects in the organisation of the activities carried out in such spaces (Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher 2014).

Jenson and colleagues' comments are important since they reiterate how complex and demanding working with digital media production in non-professional contexts can be. This complexity encompasses multiple dimensions, from the recognition of unspoken rules in a certain space to the social dynamics among participants, from these participants' different backgrounds and approaches to meaning-making to the framing adopted by the researcher when analysing and disseminating findings. These dimensions are not only related to more abstract or formal aspects of the organisation of the space or the research per se (such as learning objectives), but they also involve more practical pedagogical elements, such as session planning, equipment checking, troubleshooting and conceptual and technical support (Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher 2014). But how to deal with this complex situation when there are few (human) resources available? 'How do we define and refine the tone, pressures, and expectations associated with particular media forms in the process of engaging young people in digital production?' (Dahya 2017, 9).

The study explored in this paper is an example of the complexity involved in doing research with young people's media production practices. Here, I retrospectively examine a digital game-making programme for young people (aged 13-18) in a Latin American community centre in London/UK. In my original research, I was particularly interested in how young people articulated their identities through digital game production. My approach to identity in this study was similar to Dahya's (2017) conceptualisation of 'voice': temporary expressive articulations, subjected to specific media tools (platforms), genres (in this case, videogames) and pedagogies.

Even if in some instances I was able to reflectively address, during the study, how my decisions and positions were influential in these participants' experiences – following Schön (1991), 'reflections in action' – it was after the game-making club's conclusion – analysing data, writing up and, especially, when presenting and discussing results with supervisors and peers – that (the influence of) naturalisations and 'practical' decisions taken in order to carry out the proposed activities became more evident.

The present paper, therefore, can be seen as a 'reflection on action' (Schön 1991), a retrospective reflection about my role in this research. How the way I managed my different roles (researcher, facilitator), my own positionings (male, straight, Latino, former game designer, aligned with feminist approaches to gaming culture) and attachment to certain technical aspects (such as having been part of the developing team of *MissionMaker*) played a role in the activity and the kind of knowledges produced? How to make sense of the orchestration of apparently contradictory elements such as overarching research ideals to challenge hegemonic perceptions about games, practical elements linked to sequence of activities and technical support, and the generation of data for a PhD research?

In this paper, I argue that a possible answer to overcome some of these pitfalls is reflexivity. Reflexivity can help us to acknowledge the limitations of this type of research, avoiding then a perspective that sees digital media production as a definitive 'truth' (Dahya 2017), recognising media production as an expressive articulation of participants' subjectivities mediated by the context where and through which they were produced (Dahya 2017). In the following section, therefore, I will focus on the details around the project, the context where it was carried out and briefly present the selected case.

Reflecting about the context and selected case

The research discussed here was part of a recently concluded PhD project investigating the influence of platforms, perceptions around gaming, personal preferences and game design conventions in youth digital game-making. Informed by the democratisation ideals towards videogames (cf. Anthropy 2012), challenging the idea that games should be produced by and for 'gamers' (Shaw 2014), I was interested in exploring whether and how young people could appropriate this cultural form and articulate cultural statements through their productions. These cultural statements, in my initial hypothesis, would not only be guided by their own personal interests, preferences or background, but also influenced by their own relationship with videogames and by *MissionMaker*, the software employed used in this experience. To investigate these topics, I organised two game-making clubs in London/UK; in this paper, I explore a specific case from a community-led centre for Latin American migrants[1], where participants engaged in 12 h (spread throughout 8 weeks between October/2017 and January/2018) of activities to develop a *MissionMaker* game from ideation to final product.

The game-making club discussed here was offered as part of the aforementioned community-centre's youth programme, which provides different activities (from English language classes to 'creative' workshops) aiming to support young participants in their life in the UK. Activities were organised as an 8-week programme, and participation varied across sessions[2], with numbers ranging from 7 at lowest to 14 at highest and ages ranging from 13 to 18. Sessions were carried out at the institution's computer lab, and, after a difficult start with an English-only in-session policy, most of the programme was carried out employing a mix between English and Spanish.[3]

Participants did not have previous experiences with *MissionMaker* or game development in general, requiring therefore a certain degree of structured instructions (both in relation to software usage and design scaffolding) to produce their games. Sessions were organised in two main parts: an initial, short section (around 30% of the available time) where I introduced a specific topic to be explored – such as character development, environment construction or how to insert external media files – followed by game development time (70% of the session), where participants worked on their own ideas with my support.

In this paper, I retake a specific case from this study to reflect about how my choices and positionings influenced the expressive possibilities encountered by participants in these contexts. To discuss these influences, I focus on *Extrovertido*, a game produced by two young women, Marta (14) and Carla (15).[4] Marta and Carla attended practically all sessions[5], and were active participants, producing a complete game by the end of the club.

Extrovertido is an adventure game loosely inspired by the South Korean teen soap-opera *Orange Marmalade*: the player steps into the shoes of Baek Ma-Ri, a shy vampire who sees her romantic interest, the human Jung Jae-Min being kidnapped by her (human) rival Ah Ra. The main goal of the game is to rescue Jae-Min; what happens to the young couple after the reunion, however, was subjected to different iterations, with Marta and Carla trying out different endings (e.g., Baek Ma-Ri taking care of an amnesiac Jae-Min), until reaching the final version where Baek Ma-Ri would learn that Jung Jae-Min was, in fact, an alien carrying out a scouting mission on Earth and that he should return to his planet.

Here, I focus on how my methodological and pedagogical decisions, as well as my analytical framework, have influenced and culminated in specific understandings around the meanings produced by Marta and Carla or, borrowing Dahya's (2017) expression, elicited certain 'voices' to them. As discussed earlier, the outcomes from expressive media production methods cannot be seen as a definitive truths, but as the result of the context where they were produced (Dahya 2017; Dahya and Jenson 2015; Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher 2014) and of the 'kind of instrument' – including the researcher's interests and subjectivity – employed to read these meanings (Taylor 2018). Here I scrutinise the relationship between context, game production and knowledge stemming from my study of these game-making experiences.

In the following section, I reflect about curricular and methodological decisions taken to establish and develop this game-making club and the research process. By using *Extrovertido* as an example, I examine possible dissonances between my alignment to the use of game-making activities to achieve a 'democratisation' of gaming culture, and the actual development of these game-making clubs as a controlled expressive space.

What are games, after all? *MissionMaker* and the favouring of specific gaming experiences

The first striking element that signals my influential role in participants' productions throughout this study was the software selection: *MissionMaker*. This platform allows game-making through a series of pre-made existing 3D models and a simplified context-oriented programming language based on drop-down lists. As discussed by other authors, one of the main strengths of

Figure 1. Example of *MissionMaker* game produced by students during the game-making club.

MissionMaker is the possibility of authoring character-centric narrative-based games quite easily (Burn 2008), as seen in Figure 1 below.

The use of *MissionMaker* was a deliberate decision since one of my main objectives in the original research was to explore and understand how gaming conventions (Perron 2014) were influential in participants' game-making practices. By defining *MissionMaker* as the unique tool for the game-making club, I limited what kinds of games participants would be able to create. In the first session, when introduced to *MissionMaker* through a series of different small demo games[6], showcasing the diverse types of rooms, props and (human) characters that participants would later be able to use in their productions, I valorised specific gaming experiences in detriment of other, hinting to participants what kind of experiences they could (or should) seek.

One of the recurrent topics discussed during our game-making sessions was participants' gaming experiences: which games they used to play, how often and with whom. Marta's, Carla's and several other participants' gaming experiences were mostly confined to small mobile or online games that would could be loosely defined as 'casual' (Juul 2010), such as Marta's favourite *Candy Crush Saga*.

By limiting game production possibilities to *MissionMaker* and its character-centric, 3D world, I was implicitly telling these participants whose gaming experiences were based on 'casual' games that theirs was not relevant for game production, at least at this initial moment. Even if I tried to highlight in our discussions the multiplicity of videogames, when looking at the kind of artefacts that they would be able to produce with *MissionMaker*, it was clear that their experience with casual games would be less resonant than that of some of their colleagues (who were used to mainstream games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Just Cause 3*).

Reflecting about the use of *MissionMaker* becomes even more important when we consider that, in these game-making clubs, there was a relationship between participants' gender and gaming experiences. Most of the male participants had gaming experiences that resonated with this initial contact with *MissionMaker* – 3D based, first or third-person perspective, character-centric – whereas most of the participants whose gaming experiences was based on 'casual' games were female. Here, it is possible to identify an initial issue with my overarching alignment to a more democratic and less male-centred gaming culture: my own research design was nodding at the conventional, hegemonic forms of gaming that I wanted to challenge with these clubs.

Thus, the choice of *MissionMaker* posed a significant challenge to the development of the game-making clubs as inclusive spaces. By employing this software – and implicitly creating a divide in relation to participants' gaming repertoires – I was replicating a hegemonic gaming discourse, valorising specific gaming experiences in detriment of others. This differentiation becomes even more problematic when looking at how my initial software and pedagogical choices reproduced a pattern found in previous game inclusivity interventions, devaluing female's experiences and practices (Fisher and Harvey 2012). It also helps us to realise the strength of Nick Taylor's (2018) argument about masculinity in games and how difficult it might be for male researchers to eschew these values in research practices. It highlights how, no matter how far from these hegemonic positionings we might want to stand, they can become so ingrained in conventional practices that even the most open and accommodating of the intentions for game-making spaces can reinforce the same conventions they aim to challenge.

But how to work under these conditions? Are we male researchers, therefore, fated to a recurrent slippage towards promoting the same views we want to challenge? A more radical perspective could argue against the participation of male researchers in this kind of initiative, since they would not be sensitive to these naturalisations and nuances. This perspective, however, can cause more harm than good, firstly by placing all the critical reflexive burden related to research activities on non-male researchers (Taylor 2018) and, secondly, by contributing to the ghettoisation within the field, after all, it is by facing and working through the issues caused by these naturalisations that they can be overcome (Harvey and Fisher 2016). But how to work through these naturalisations in practice?

One solution could be to prioritise approaches that provide a 'common ground' for all participants involved. This was achieved through a deliberate pedagogical decision, asking participants to start their productive process through narrative development. By asking students to focus firstly on the story they wanted to tell through their game, I was providing a levelled field for all participants, after all, even if there were different levels of knowledge about games, all of them were already experts on narrative (Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020).

A relevant affordance of this narrative-based approach was the opportunity for participants to bring their own personal preferences into their games from the start. Freed (at least initially) from constraints posed by technical aspects related to games or the software, young people used this initial moment with narratives to construct specific self-expressive elements. That was Marta and Carla' case: they borrowed characters from one of their favourite media products at the time, *Orange Marmalade*, to create their storyline. While the implications of this global assemblage of elements (a game based on a South Korean soap opera and produced in the UK by two Latinas) is beyond the scope of this paper, this is an interesting example of how powerful the use of stories as starting points for young people's media productions can be for allowing participants to 'write themselves' into their artefacts (Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020).

This does not mean, however, that the narrative-based approach did not generate other issues. One noticeable element was that, after the first two sessions, participants struggled to translate their story from its narrative form into a game: most of the initial stories were produced based on audio-visual cultures, with the unfolding sequence of events being considerably linear and heavily scripted. This link to filmic culture emerged from some interviews with participants often using camera angles (e.g., 'close-up') and transitions (e.g., 'fade') to talk about their game sequences.

Thus, while this narrative-oriented process helped to 'level' participants experiences in the game-making sessions, it also posed a different obstacle: several of their initial designs did not account for player actions, creating a major issue for transforming their ideas into games. How could I discuss participants' subjectivities and the influence of (gaming, software) conventions in their productions, if the final products were not playable? More importantly, how to keep an 8-week programme running if participants were already happy with their productions as they were in week 3 or 4?

My response to these issues was implemented through my 'pedagogical' power: I again intervened, this time setting specific design criteria to these participants. These criteria were composed not only of 'narrative' elements such as clear protagonist and antagonist, but also of 'technical challenges' – such as the use of four rules[7], two triggers[8] and one obstacle for the player before reaching the final goal. In addition, they were asked to design an opening dialogue for their game, which would later be recorded and added into these artefacts.

As it is possible to imagine, each technical challenge generated dissonances in relation to the ideological goals of this initiative, favouring the same conventions I wanted to disrupt. This does not mean, however, that participants necessarily conformed to these naturalisations, often proposing subversive designs that challenged the implicit conventions invoked by the context. In the following section, I will discuss Marta and Carla's 'subversive design' process, and how all elements involved in the research (e.g., software affordances and constraints, pedagogical choices, my own subjectivities) influenced the kind of knowledge produced through the investigation of this design process.

Reading beyond the written lines: design constraints and expressions of gender

The late introduction of the technical challenges mentioned in the previous section seem to have helped participants to focus more on creating a playable artefact (and not only a narrative) at the end of the programme. This was achieved, however, by imposing a specific conception of 'digital game' to them, one with challenges, obstacles and rules rather than a freer digital experience. I was, again, jarring against the democratic ethos I wanted to foster, embracing a conventional approach

to videogames based on regular Game Design strategies centred around challenge and conflicts (e.g., Fullerton 2018) instead of on divergent gaming experiences beyond these concepts (Anthropy 2012; Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020).

Extrovertido engages with elements that are somewhat distant from conventional gaming elements. It challenges normative masculinity with its 'reverse damsel in distress' approach to the story, where the female characters (Baek Ma Ri and Ah Ra) have agency and Jae Min is a passive 'prize'. Their original intended final game sequence, where the player would 'take care' of an amnesiac Jae Min, also subverts the expectations towards (mainstream/conventional) digital games by exploring feelings and emotional experiences rather than the more conventional physical and visual ones (Bogost 2006).

By highlighting this imaginary 'caring' game mechanic, my intention is not to reinforce stereotypes about gendered preferences in gaming (cf. Jenson and de Castell 2008), but to explore how Marta and Carla's creative work is shaped by their own subjectivities, by the existing – technical and conceptual[9] – constraints behind my role as practitioner, which culminated in this initiative (Dahya 2017) and by my own subjectivities as a researcher (Corlett and Mavin 2018). To understand these influences in their creative work, I will explore how Marta and Carla articulated ideas about femininity and gender in *Extrovertido* by focusing on the evolution process of the game ending sequence design and on my readings of it.

Marta and Carla's initial proposal for *Extrovertido* culminated in a sequence inspired by an imagined form of love common in romantic teen media texts such as *Twilight*, in which one of the members of the romantic pair sacrifices him/herself to preserve the wellbeing of his/her romantic counterpart, creating a relationship that is in a grey area between selfless love and possessive obsession. An element that intrigued me in their planned ending sequence was the role played by female characters or, in other words, the position towards femininity 'voiced' by Marta and Carla through their game. As discussed earlier, their female characters are constructed as strong and agentive, while their only male character is passive; moreover, he would end up completely dependent on the player (conversely, on a female character) to survive due to his amnesiac state. The question that rises then is: why would strong women – such as Baek Ma Ri and Ah Ra – subject themselves to cater to Jae Min's needs?

My first impression – one that considered their choice of having Ma Ri subjecting herself to Jae Min as contradictory to the agentive position assumed by her female characters – was probably a reading that stemmed from my positioning towards feminist/postfeminist (Gill 2016) dichotomies. In this initial reading, I interpreted that Marta and Carla were articulating different (and contradictory) positions in relation to femininity, one of the main characteristics of postfeminist stances linked to neoliberal logic (Gill 2016). But to what extent was this an imposition of my perspectives onto their creative decisions? Was this what they were articulating, or was I 'listening' to what I 'wanted to hear'?

Reflexivity, in this case, can help to sustain (or challenge) these kind of readings: rather than simply accepting a reading that corroborated expectations, for example, acknowledging your position as a researcher becomes an important step to assure rigour, for instance (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2017). Here, however, it is important to remark that this reflective acknowledgement of one's own position is not easy to be carried out. The proximity to the situation might obfuscate this process: in this specific case, the dialogue with other scholars – such as PhD supervisors – made clearer the need to explicitly address my positionings and the subjectivities sustaining these readings.

After these reflections, I grounded my reading of their 'contradictory' feminine positioning in an intersectional sensibility towards this double articulation of feminine roles (agentive and submissive). While I cannot claim to have a fully compatible life experience with Marta and Carla, there was a considerable overlap in our upbringings as self-identified Latin Americans, and this (partial) insider position into their culture (Berger 2015) helped me to ponder about this double articulation. Baek Ma Ri is, to some extent, a prototypical example of one of the ways femininity can be performed in Latin America, combining determination and agency, on one hand, with a caring and

subservient side – especially towards male counterparts or family members (Lawson 1998) – on the other hand. Growing up as a male Latino, I had seen this double articulation being inculcated in myself and those around me; thus, to some extent, it was this lived experience that allowed me to identify and further explore the reasoning sustaining this game idea after my first initial reading about this creative choice.

Here, the aforementioned insider-outsider dichotomy (Berger 2015) becomes even more critical, since I had to assure that I was not simply projecting my own perspectives or experiences as a Latino onto their production. To clarify that, I then explored these creative decisions in an interview with Marta and Carla, who articulated 'taking care of Jae Min' as an agentive (and non-contradictory) position:

Baek Ma-Ri's female role

Marta: Because she is independent, she can do things by herself …
Carla: It's not like she was going just to be waiting for someone else to do something for her …

The excerpt above illustrates how, to these game-makers, Baek Ma Ri was an independent, strong woman, no matter the decisions she had made with her life. Having the capacity to listen to them, reflect about theirs and my own positionings, and reanalyse the data generated – the interviews and their proposed game design – thus afforded a more rigorous approach to knowledge production and a deeper understanding of their engagement with this initiative.

But what about the role played by technical constraints in Marta and Carla's productive process? The main issue around technical elements arising from this initiative was the dissonance between their originally proposed game design (the 'caring' sequence) and the affordances of *MissionMaker*. Most of the game mechanics suggested by *MissionMaker* are physical, such as running, collecting objects and fighting, quite different from the emotional experience they wanted to convey. Marta and Carla struggled when they had to translate their idea into a sequence to be played in *Mission-Maker*. The following dialogue illustrates one of the scaffolding moments when I tried to support them in producing the 'caring' sequence:

Building the caring mechanic

Researcher: Ok, tell me.
Marta: Bruno, we need help …
Researcher: Ok, what do you want to do?
Carla: How can we take care of him?
Researcher: Oh, this is about … ah, yes, the end of your game … what did you want her to do?
Marta: We could tuck him into a bed and …
Researcher: Hm … we cannot do that … remember what we can do here in the game … it is in 'actions' [one of the drop-down lists found in MissionMaker rule editor]
Carla: Yes, but that …
Researcher: What if she brings some stuff to him, like medicines …
Marta: I don't know … we will think about it.

Here, it is possible to notice not only how the specificity of the selected software hindered their productive process, but also how my own scaffolding strategies were not enough to conceptually support their design. In hindsight, my suggestion merely reproduced my previous gaming experiences, relying on how games such as *Stardew Valley* represent affection and care: acquire and give items to the non-playable characters that you want to strengthen your relationship with. This input was not well accepted by them, as hinted by Marta in the previous excerpt.

Eventually, they opted to completely modify their originally proposed ending, scrapping the caring mechanic in favour of Carla's new proposal: Jung Jae Min, after being rescued, reveals his true nature as an alien spy and returns to his planet, as seen in Figure 2. While there are several other elements here that are significant for youth digital media production, such as questions around cross-media adaptation and creativity (Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020), this example is especially

Figure 2. Baek Ma-Ri meets Jung Jae Min in human (left) and alien (right) forms.

useful to showcase how my methodological (e.g., use of *MissionMaker*) and pedagogical (e.g., the technical challenges) choices shaped their design process, often favouring conventional aspects of gaming.

While we can only speculate whether the use of a different mediating tool with less 'conventional gaming baggage' – such as *Twine* (cf. Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020) – would have changed the final outcome, it becomes clear that my background (both as game designer and as *MissionMaker* developer) and my pedagogical choices played a significant role in their design process. This is not to say that my influence is the most important outcome from this exercise: on the contrary, it is worth remarking that *despite* my influence, Marta and Carla were able to produce two very different – and, in their own ways, creative – proposals for their game.

More important than the influence of the software, however, is Marta and Carla's capacity to articulate a discourse that elegantly solves the ambiguity towards their gendered stance. By setting both Baek Ma Ri and Jung Jae Min free, Marta and Carla produced an ending in which the protagonist, after showing all her grit to do what she thought it was best, was free again rather than being trapped in an unbalanced relationship. While discussing the implications of this discourse is beyond the scope of this paper, not acknowledging their ability to appropriate digital games (including the platform) to articulate such discourse would have been an understatement of their creative capabilities.

Reflecting about their final game and the whole experience, it is possible to consider Marta and Carla's participation a success, since they were able to produce an artefact that articulated some of their personal ideas. Nevertheless, my decisions as the organiser and convenor of this initiative added several challenges to their productive trajectory, often reproducing the conventional perspectives towards gaming that I intended to challenge (the rationale for this project). The questions that emerge from this experience are then: how to work in these conditions?

How to overcome these methodological and pedagogical pitfalls in youth digital game-making initiatives?

Final remarks

As the organiser, convenor and researcher reporting on results from this game-making club, I exerted a significant power over the space and, to some extent, over participants' productions. By choosing the topics that were discussed in the sessions and in which order, relying on specific games as examples, limiting participants to a single software and determining game design steps and game constraints for their productions, I was presenting to these young people specific views on how games should be, how games should be produced and, to some extent, what was expected from them in this project.

Jenson, Dahya, and Fisher (2014) remarks about the complexities of youth digital media production as a research approach are crucial. We – as researchers – might found ourselves juggling multiple roles in the same context, and this conflation of roles can culminate in curricular/methodological conundrums: a practitioner's on-the-fly productive solution might become a researcher's nightmare. In a reflective exercise, this might have been the most difficult element to balance in this project: as a researcher, I wanted to be able to achieve my research objectives, exploring how expressive game-making happens in specific software, mediated by specific constraints. As the convenor of game-making sessions, however, I wanted to create an environment where participants were able to enjoy the activities and, more importantly, to 'thrive' by producing interesting and compelling games, showing that 'everyone' could make games. 'Reflecting in action' (Schön 1991) within a specific role can be easier: this was the case, for instance, of the language shift in the sessions – triggered by a reflection on the pedagogical challenges – or the use of an intersectional approach to read their expression of femininity (even if prompted by a dialogical approach with other researchers). Understanding the impact of choices 'across' roles (the implications of a pedagogical choice to the research), such as my imposition of design constraints to my research, can be more difficult to be scrutinised 'in action', being easier reflected afterwards – or 'on action' (Schön 1991).

More critically, as I explored in this paper, these impositions often reinforced some of the very conventional notions about gaming that I wanted to challenge. The adoption of specific design criteria was especially problematic, since it can act as a Trojan horse for the insertion of hegemonic values and practices in non-mainstream media production communities, favouring, even if not intentionally, hegemonic media production values while also diminishing opportunities for disruptive behaviour (Harvey and Fisher 2016; Parry, Howard, and Penfold 2020). In the case discussed here, some of these 'hegemonic decisions' had problematic consequences towards gendered discourses about gaming: for instance, most participants who aligned to the valued repertoire and gaming conventions were male, which reinforces the idea of gaming as a male space.

This is not to say that the whole research was problematic: participants in general enjoyed the experience, most of them were happy with the games produced, and the analysis of game-makers participation provides important insights into the relationships between gaming, platforms and cultural backgrounds in youth digital media production. Nevertheless, this reflexive exercise about the game-making experience and the knowledge produced about it is of utmost importance: it illustrates how even the simplest of the pedagogical strategies, taken with the best of the intentions, can undermine the very same values the research is founded on.

The reflection on *Extrovertido* showcases how conventional gaming became ingrained in this research, highlighting the importance of reflexivity to studies about young people digital production. Reflexivity should be seen as a recurrent exercise, with different iterations happening at different times, from the change in the language used in sessions to the retrospective analysis of my impositions in participants' productions. In the context of youth media production, this constant practice can help us to identify the reproduction and dissemination of these conventional mediators in non-mainstream contexts.

Reflexivity, by no means, is a silver bullet for social change: as discussed earlier (cf. Littler 2005; Haraway 1997/2018), an extreme overreliance on it can culminate in the same self-congratulating, egotistical, celebratory perspective that it can disrupt in the context of media production (Harvey and Fisher 2016). It is not a simple process, but a painful one (Harvey and Fisher 2016; Taylor 2018), often dependent on distance from what is being scrutinised. Nevertheless, it is by working through this pain that we can acknowledge and point out our limitations and issues, and envision different ways of promoting media production initiatives without reifying the same values we aim to disrupt.

Notes

1. Age range: 13-18. Most of them self-identified with Latin American countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia and Dominican Republic.
2. Since the community centre receives new members across the whole year, the game-making programme was seen by the institution as an opportunity to introduce newcomers to the already existing youth community, culminating in the variation across participants.
3. During the first two sessions, we adopted an English-only policy in sessions, in order to foster participants' English-speaking skills. However, after these two weeks, it became clear that some participants who did not have an extensive knowledge about English were being alienated from the experience, struggling to participate. The mixed use of English and Spanish was a compromise between fostering English language practice while not alienating these participants that had a very limited use of the language. Therefore, we adopted a bilingual policy, favouring English with participants that were capable of using that language, and relying on Spanish when something was not clear. Participants were encouraged to use English, relying on Spanish only as a last resort for communication. Although my native language is Portuguese, I am a fluent English and Spanish speaker.
4. Pseudonyms.
5. Marta was present in all 8 sessions, Carla missed one.
6. All demos games included a small mission which depended on environment exploration and object acquisition/collection.
7. Rules are how coding happens in *MissionMaker*. One example is 'if door is clicked, door opens'.
8. Triggers are objects that detect when another object enters, exits or stays inside the space delimited by the trigger. They can be used in rules as well, such as 'if player enters the trigger, NPC1 walks towards the player'.
9. Such as the limitations promoted by my arbitrary criteria for game design or the narrative-based design approach.

Notes on contributor

Bruno de Paula's research focuses on the relationships between digital media production, platforms and subjectivities. His doctoral research investigated the links between identities and the influential role of conventions and platforms in young people's game-making practices.

ORCID

Bruno de Paula 🅸 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3503-5177

References

Ahn, June, Mega Subramaniam, Elizabeth Bonsignore, Anthony Pellicone, Amanda Waugh, and Jason Yip. 2014. ""I Want to Be a Game Designer or Scientist": Connected Learning and Developing Identities with Urban, African-American Youth." *Proceedings of International Conference of the Learning Sciences, ICLS* 2: 657–664.

Alvesson, Mats, and Kaj Skoldberg. 2017. *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Anderson, Chris. 2013. *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution*. London: Random House Business.

Anthropy, Anna. 2012. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Berger, Roni. 2015. "'Now I See It, Now I Don't': Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research'." *Qualitative Research* 15 (2): 219–234. doi:10.1177/1468794112468475.

Bogost, Ian. 2006. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Burn, Andrew. 2008. "The Case of Rebellion: Researching Multimodal Texts." In *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*, edited by Julie Coiro, C. Lankshear, M. Knobel, and D. Leu, 149–177. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Cannon, Michelle, John Potter, and Andrew Burn. 2018. "Dynamic, Playful and Productive Literacies." *Changing English* 25 (2): 180–197. doi:10.1080/1358684X.2018.1452146.

Carr, Diane. 2019. "Methodology, Representation, and Games." *Games and Culture* 14 (7–8): 707–723.

Corlett, Sandra, and Sharon Mavin. 2018. "Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods: History and Traditions*, edited by Catherine Cassell, Ann Cunliffe, and Gina Grandy, 377–398. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Dahya, Negin. 2017. "Critical Perspectives on Youth Digital Media Production: "Voice" and Representation in Educational Contexts." *Learning, Media and Technology* 42 (1): 100–111. doi:10.1080/17439884.2016.1141785.

Dahya, Negin, and Jennifer Jenson. 2015. "Mis/Representations in School-Based Digital Media Production: An Ethnographic Exploration with Muslim Girls." *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 9 (2): 108–123. doi:10.1080/15595692.2015.1013209.

Denner, Jill, Steve Bean, and Jacob Martinez. 2009. "The Girl Game Company: Engaging Latina Girls in Information Technology." *Afterschool Matters* 8. National Institute on Out-of-School Time: 26–35.

Denner, Jill, Linda Werner, and Eloy Ortiz. 2012. "Computer Games Created by Middle School Girls: Can They Be Used to Measure Understanding of Computer Science Concepts?" *Computers & Education* 58 (1): 240–249. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2011.08.006.

Dussel, Inés, and Negin Dahya. 2017. "Introduction: Problematizing Voice and Representation in Youth Media Production." *Learning, Media and Technology* 42 (1): 1–7. doi:10.1080/17439884.2016.1205602.

Fisher, Stephanie J., and Alison Harvey. 2012. "Intervention for Inclusivity: Gender Politics and Indie Game Development." *Loading …* 7 (11): 25–40.

Fullerton, Tracy. 2018. *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*. 4th ed. Boca Raton: CRC Press.

Gill, Rosalind. 2016. "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (4): 610–630. doi:10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293.

Haraway, Donna. 2000. "A Cyborg Manifesto." In *The Cybercultures Reader*, edited by David Bell, and Barbara M. Kennedy, 291–324. London: New York Routledge.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. 2018. *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Harvey, Alison, and Stephanie Fisher. 2016. "Growing Pains: Feminisms and Intergenerationality in Digital Games." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (4): 648–662. doi:10.1080/14680777.2016.1193295.

Jenson, Jennifer, Negin Dahya, and Stephanie Fisher. 2014. "Valuing Production Values: A "Do It Yourself" Media Production Club." *Learning, Media and Technology* 39 (2): 215–228.

Jenson, Jennifer, and Suzanne de Castell. 2008. "Theorizing Gender and Digital Gameplay: Oversights, Accidents and Surprises." *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 2 (1): 15–25.

Jenson, Jennifer, Stephanie Fisher, and Suzanne de Castell. 2011. "Disrupting the Gender Order: Leveling Up and Claiming Space in an After-School Video Game Club." *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* 3 (1): 148–169.

Juul, Jesper. 2010. *A Casual Revolution Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press.

Kafai, Y. B., and Quinn Burke. 2016. *Connected Gaming: What Making Video Games Can Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lammes, Sybille. 2007. "Approaching Game-Studies: Towards a Reflexive Methodology of Games as Situated Cultures." In *Proceedings of DiGRA* 2007, 25–30. Tokyo: Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA).

Lawson, Victoria A. 1998. "Hierarchical Households and Gendered Migration in Latin America: Feminist Extensions to Migration Research." *Progress in Human Geography* 22 (1): 39–53. doi:10.1191/030913298677526732.

Littler, Jo. 2005. "Beyond the Boycott." *Cultural Studies* 19 (2). Routledge: 227–252. doi:10.1080/09502380500077771.

Parry, Rebecca, Frances Howard, and Louisa Penfold. 2020. "Negotiated, Contested and Political: The Disruptive Third Spaces of Youth Media Production." *Learning, Media and Technology* 45 (0). Routledge: 409–421.

Peppler, Kylie A., and Yasmin B. Kafai. 2007. "What Videogame Making Can Teach Us about Literacy and Learning: Alternative Pathways into Participatory Culture." In Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference. Tokyo: Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA).

Perron, Bernard. 2014. "Conventions." In *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf, and Bernard Perron, 74–82. New York: Routledge.

Schön, D. 1991. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Shaw, Adrienne. 2014. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Taylor, Nick. 2018. "I'd Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Gamerbro: How Masculinity Mediates Research on Digital Play." *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 34 (64): 10–30.

Vossoughi, Shirin, Paula K. Hooper, and Meg Escudé. 2016. "Making Through the Lens of Culture and Power: Toward Transformative Visions for Educational Equity." *Harvard Educational Review* 86 (2): 206–232. doi:10.17763/0017-8055.86.2.206.

Willett, Rebekah. 2016. "Making, Makers, and Makerspaces: A Discourse Analysis of Professional Journal Articles and Blog Posts About Makerspaces in Public Libraries." *The Library Quarterly* 86 (3): 313–329. doi:10.1086/686676.