

Educational Significance of a Game in Post-modern Society

Abstract

The study represents a chapter in the book called Study on Theory and Methodology of the Game. Readers are presented with the meaning of a game and educational experience in the society, which is often labelled as post-modern. The study aims mainly at future teachers and there are examples of games accompanied by the methodology analysis in the book.

Keywords: *game, education, creativity, phenomenology, illusion of reality, play roles, simulation possible, ethical challenge.*

Introduction

“Everything is possible”, says Jean Francois Lyotard (born 1942) in his crucial work *The Post-modern Condition (La condition postmoderne, 1979)*, pointing thus indirectly to the fact that the traditional means of our thinking are absolutely insufficient for us to understand the chaotic condition we live in. According to Lyotard, in the past, people tried to explain themselves by means of myths which demonstrated the origin and meaning of culture giving it a solid character. Later, this task was taken over by science based on reason. These are the philosophical facts within the framework of which we put our essay about a game as a possible remedy for the “pathology” of the world of our days. Both means of education are closely related, neither of them is new or recently discovered by modern pedagogy, but both are still neglected and underrated by the pedagogical praxis.

Illusion of reality in post-modern world

During the past several decades the modern western society has surrounded itself by so many new things, that we began to lose contact with our own reality. We live in a secondary world of mediated perceptions, a world where we lose our own experience, and we do not notice, that between man and Nature there is a barrier formed not only by culture, but also by a preponderant dead weight consisting of publicity, single-wrapped toothpicks, rapid Internet, and SMS communication with the whole world, virtual realities, gambling machines, tower-block housing estates and huge megapoles. Tower-block housing estates are one of many reasons why children – and in many cases adults as well – play games and entertainment computer television, or give an unreal image of the world by a pseudo-artistic reflection of the reality provided with technical sound-track. A housing estate itself conceals many snares in the form of various gangs, dirty streets, possible injuries, etc., but tower-blocks themselves change into physical and mainly psychological barriers which prevent people from coming into natural contact with their contemporaries. Thus, a child grows up socially isolated. Often, however, we do not realize that it is not only the material surroundings that change, but that it is mainly the consumers of this life-style – children and teenagers – who get within “the tow of the image of the world”.

This world related to a game, but also the philosophy that tries to show the way “out of the labyrinth”, are usually described as post-modern. German philosopher Wolfgang Iser conceives of post-modernism as a state of radical plurality, which he explains by an anti-totalitarian need to be engaged in the plurality and diversity of the conceptions of language games, not out of negligence or cheap relativism, but because of historical experience and motives of freedom. (Iser, 1994, pp. 12–13)

Post-modernism defines the world in most eloquent terms when it says that the world is a GAME. A game which we continually reshape in our minds, a game that forces us to abandon the established schemes of life. Still, a game is conceived as a vital impulse with its own value and order, says Eugen Fink. “The game is also cultivated in this way, it is conceived of as a remedy for the civilization damage of modern technocracy, it is much –praised as a rejuvenating and life-refreshing force – and, at the same time, as a possibility to plunge into a keen morning charm and plastic creation”. (Fink, 1992, p. 5). Eugene Fink considers the world of our days as a period of objective game possibilities and opportunities to play, because no other period has such huge apparatus for life at its disposal, such as playgrounds, gambling rooms, stadiums, parks, international competitions, mass production of toys, etc.

Despite the fact that, according to Fink a considerable number of games available to us, we use the out-of-school education and the game penetrates the “classical” schools only by chance, with pupils being rewarded by a game, rather than a permanent part of it. What does the post-modern world of game look like?

We lose contact with the real world. During the last fifty years between us and the natural environment – Nature – there has risen, a wall which isolates us from our essence. We are surrounded by housing estates and skyscrapers, supermarkets are being built around towns, cars become indispensable every time we go shopping, or even when we go to work. A child living on the 20th floor of such a housing estate will then prefer computer games or television rather than trudge down the stairs on the way to the sand-pit, let alone when sand-pits become relatively dangerous in our days. A child that is a bit older has learnt about wood in the natural science classes at school and finds out the characteristics of fire at random if she/he is at a scouts’ camp on holiday. Ecological centres establish zoos with domesticated animals in order for children to see what a rabbit or a hen looks like as well as to see that a chicken is not grown in the field.

We become a silent majority. Nowadays, the world is interwoven by a spider-like communication network, and thus we cannot complain about lack of communication with a friend living at the antipodes. To exaggerate a bit, we could say that the whole civilization has been interconnected by the Internet regardless of the distance, borders, political situation, etc. This interconnection is only illusionary, as our integrity has been damaged by extremism, racism and dogmatism which have been slumbering in us for centuries and change sooner or later, but with periodical regularity, into an armed conflict. Thanks to the communication technologies we can watch a war in live coverage and consider the television death as something natural. We depend on self-confident and educated reporters who give us their interpretation of the world in tonight’s news. Will the world be black or white? Will the gentlemen in turbans be good or bad today? Access to information makes people free, but because of a gigantic avalanche of it we are thankful in the end for an editorial published in “independent” press. It was not by chance that as early as the first half of the 20th century Celestin Freinet taught his pupils how to write and work with a text so that they could express their thoughts and opinions not only in front of the class but also in public. He taught them not to be “the silent majority” which would passively take over “newspaper and radio truths”, but he was striving to bring up creative human beings with their own attitude to life.

We surround ourselves with substitutes. The Pyramid in Las Vegas is, in a way, a virtual reality, but it may as well be a good joke of the architect who wanted to take us in. Let us not lose our pedagogical optimism and let us believe that there still may be people who do not consider the local “pyramid” as an original and, on visiting Egypt, the original tombs just remind them of what they know from home and they wonder how only it is possible that many thousand years ago someone created something so fantastically similar to “our Luxor in Las Vegas”. Or, even worse, they will think that the Egyptians could have renovated it at least a little bit, when they make them travel to Egypt and spend their money as tourists. If a child has no possibility of comparison and if she/he cannot have the feeling of her/his own experience, then later it is difficult for her/him to tell good from evil, as it was difficult for the poor prisoners of Plato’s cavern.

We cease to experience and begin to enjoy. What we have described above results in the loss of natural experience which is replaced by a virtual experience. “I had a pretty hard time last night, playing my computer game,” said one of the pupils from the 7th form, not dissimilar from other children from the class. We try to share the world we have experienced earlier and soon we get into the tow of its image. Virtual reality is omnipotent, it can “materialize” our ideas which we have only been dreaming of. It allows us to experience everything according to a programme we have chosen, without forcing us to move our bottoms from the chair. We do not even need to have mastered a given activity. The ways we as subjects experience emotionally real or virtual situations are identical or at least very similar it is the means that differ. While in the first case we have to be active, in the second case it is sufficient if you move your mouse on the desk. “I have never had such a hard time at my computer,” said a pupil while climbing a hill. Hopefully, it was not the last hill in his/her life.

Game characteristics and its educational significance

It is difficult to characterize a game from the point of view of its educational significance for several reasons. One of them is, of course, that the term itself is too large and in our minds it includes a great number of different activities, such as sports games, computer games and theatre plays. Every author gives a different definition, and thus, if we integrate a series of opinions we could reach a conclusion that a game is an activity (mental or physical) which has its meaning included in itself (e.g. because it results from child’s nature), or its meaning is outside the game itself and then it becomes a means of attaining other goals (pedagogical or educa-

tional). Rules are important principles of a game, which supply difficulty and they direct the mentioned activity. Should the definition of a game be complete, we have to mention other attributes that further describe a game and emphasise the pedagogical aspects.

Game is entertainment but also instruction

It is probable that we mostly remember pleasant moments we spent at school, moments when prolix and boring school activities were replaced by more or less entertaining games. Any game that is well guided can turn even the most hateful duties into pleasure and joy. It is not surprising then if children enjoy a game in itself not only at school but also out of school where it assumes more various functions and forms.

Game is life story

It is natural that children and young people of our days like fairy-tales and adventure stories. If we accept the idea that a game is “an image of the world” then a story is “a screenplay and the very legend of a game”. Every day we witness various events which we tell each other by means of stories, and children often reshape them into the central theme of a game. For a pedagogue it is natural to observe children’s games, but not everyone can decode the essence of the message a story conveys to us. It is indirectly, by means of stories, that we learn about children’s secrets, about the ways they experience their daily little events, about their adventures and experiences. Hermeneutics, the science that focused firstly on the interpretation of biblical texts, has become a social interpretative science and it helps us understand people’s behaviour and their experience. Even though a story can, up to a degree, be subjectively interpreted, it takes us into distant experience of people and helps us understand a given situation. You are as you present yourself (or as you would like to present yourself) in a story (by means of a story) within a game itself. There may be as many interpretations of a story as there are story-tellers. A game together with its story then demonstrates faithfully the culture of a given nation, the values of an individual and the community where the individual grows up.

Game makes it possible to play roles

We usually enter the world of a game by saying “let’s play as if...” However, if we enter the world of a game, we usually get over the “as if”, and that is why the borders between reality and a game are often erased. Even though we play “as if” (be it as adults or children), there comes a moment when we cease to perceive the surrounding world and commit ourselves fully to a game. Then, our acts done under

the influence of the game are excusable. (We tend to say “it was in the heat of the game”, etc.)

If we enter the world of games, we assume a role which is described by rules, like a theatre role in a screenplay. In a theatre performance, having always the same and identical text, different Hamlets can always express different thoughts and messages according to the context of the time period. Similarly, game players can experience their roles always differently and uniquely. Thus, thanks to simulation games, adults as well as children can try roles they would never encounter in their real lives, or a child can practice a role just because she/he will come across it sometime when she/he has grown up.

Game Mediates Experience

If a participant decides to accept the given rules of a game, she/he becomes an active creator of “a new story” and she/he experiences a lot of activities directly, without mediation. She/he does not depend on the professional and well-grounded explanation of her/his teacher or on a universal encyclopedia, but only on her/his own abilities or the abilities of her/his classmates “within the scope of the world” of the game. With them, s/he tries to overcome all obstacles in the form of ingenious rules. The experiences resulting from one’s own and unique experience become then a firm basis for a possible change of personality.

Game supplies us with meaning

At the pre-school age, exceptionally even at the early-school age, a game is usually almost the only activity indispensable for the harmonic development of personality. It is an activity that children enjoy and one that forms the basis of the meaning of life. Even though Viktor Frankl stresses that unpleasant, even fatal, situations also have a logotherapeutical meaning, a game is natural for children. Professional literature gives many examples of deprived children who could not play in their childhood.

Game makes simulation possible – facing unrealizable reality

Every game is a simulation by nature, because it pretends something or imitates it. The essence of the simulation (in the so-called simulation games in particular) is to create a model which presents, within a game, a reality (a problem), and which can react to the behaviour of a players and of the organizer of a game. In “the game space” then, a players can face situations that in the real world are only exceptional. The essence of this exceptional character lies in a certain danger these situations bring or can bring.

Game is knowledge and knowledge of oneself

If a pedagogue plays games with the children and if she/he is a good observer, she/he has a unique opportunity to learn about her/his pupils in a quite different way than s/he has done before when the children were sitting at their desks or in other standard situations. For a good organizer and pedagogue it is not the result of the game that should matter, but the course of the game itself during which she/he can observe the way the players behave, the way they communicate with each other, who is dominant and competent in the processes of decision-making, who is considered to be the opinion leader, the way different roles are fulfilled, etc.

To perform a certain role (as we have already mentioned) is characteristic of a game. The pedagogue has a peculiar and unique opportunity to compare player's behaviour in real life, in the real world, with the behaviour within the limits of the game, in the fictitious world of "as if". What is a child in the civil life like, and how does she/he manage the role of a policeman, a mother or a guard in a game? Despite the fact that every person has been prescribed certain rules of behaviour already, there is a large space for a player to make her/his own fulfillment and to experience her/his role. Will the policeman, performed by a particular player, be as nice as last time, or will she/he be strict, or even aggressive? If so, let us ask why. A sensitive pedagogue knows that a good pupil in the class does not have to be as good and well-behaved a policeman in the game. For the pedagogue, a game has a diagnostic significance, for the child (the participant of the game) it opens a space for self-knowledge.

Game is ethical challenge

The world of a game also has its space where "the drama" can take place and where there is a strict order, usually defined by rules. These rules differ from the rules of the real world, and in turn, "the laws" of the normal world are not valid in the world of a game. Breaking of the rules brings about "awakening". Without pity, we are excluded and ordered out into the reality. The child learns thus to become familiar with rules that can be useful in practical life, too.

During a game, the player faces this problem: "How shall I proceed in order to get over a given obstacle without breaking the rules?" The organizer (the pedagogue) works on a sensible predisposition that if the players keep to the game rules they will keep to the rules (laws) of real life, too – i. e. they will behave in a highly-principled way. Thus, in today's conceptions of out-of-school education, a game justly ranks among efficacious means of ethical education. But let us not stop only by the rules. It is not by chance that in many games the participants face situations where they have to negotiate with each other, bid and submit to one another, abandon one's attitudes and change one's values. At other times, they are deliber-

ately made to face an ethical dilemma, etc. Even though a game does not have to be directly designated for ethical education, it always brings with it a whole gamut of opportunities in which the player's conscious "I" can manifest itself (e.g. to prefer to help a friend rather than win a race, etc.) and the pedagogue can well observe this behaviour and interpret it carefully. A sensitive pedagogue could ask this question: "Why does a child who has been unable to accept the rules of life behaves so well in class?" In order to come up to the expectation of the teacher, in order to win, to be admired?

Game is freedom as well as order

"The world of a game" is limited not only by its own game space, but also by the possibilities of the participants, by the rules and by the time which is at our disposal. On the one hand, a game keeps limiting the participant in some way, on the other hand it only invites her/him and entices her/him, e.g. by means of good motivation. The player should have a possibility to decide herself/himself whether or not she/he wants to participate in the game. Thus, let us not forget the free will and the freedom with which the participants enter the game. If this principle were broken, the beautiful world of the game ceases to exist and we find ourselves in the real world of commands and regulations again.

If we are to sum up all the aspects and significance of a game we have outlined so far, then we could correct our definition of a game once more. We can characterize a game as a free, time-limited activity exercised by a group or an individual, child or adult, that is based on the interest of the subject and the significance of which lies either in the activity itself or outside the game (as, e.g., a motive or a goal). Then a game is a means to get various needs or to fulfill various goals. However, a game differs from practical life activities by its specific rules and by internal game elements, such as competition or identification with roles (even with those roles that we would deliberately refuse to assume in our real lives). A game usually satisfies player's needs, it brings entertainment, instruction, experience, etc.

Even though a game is a phenomenon more ancient than humanity, even though we have had an opportunity to meet its diverse functions in historical conceptions of pedagogy, it is still a good and sensible means of education just because of its natural character, significance and authenticity. Thanks to these, a game creates a good basis for people to encounter the world (not only the virtual one) in its diversity and beauty.

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