CHILDHOODS AND PLAY: FACEBOOK, EXHIBITION AND COMPETITION

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Résumé

L'objectif de ce document vise à explorer les relations entre le jeu et les enfants dans le contexte contemporain. L'article considère le jeu d'enfants comme pratique significative à partir des nouvelles technologies de l'information et de la communication. Comme les enfants associent Facebook aux jeux, Facebook représente le point central de cet article. Nous traitons les jeux auxquels les enfants jouent, les articulations les plus appropriées entre les enfants, la socialisation et Facebook. Nous proposons d'entrer dans l'univers où les enfants, les représentations, les médias et les adultes entrent en relation. Nous analysons Facebook comme la plate-forme contemporaine la plus importante à partir de laquelle la socialisation, l'exposition et la concurrence sont construites par les enfants.

Mots clés

Jeux, enfants, Facebook

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explore the relationship between games, play and children in the contemporary context. The article begins with the consideration of children's play as a meaningful practice focussing on new technologies of information and communication. Along the research, Facebook was identified as the most important place that children associated with games. That is why, the role that Facebook "plays" is one of the most important focusses of this paper: the uses that our informants report of the most used social network, the games they play and the most relevant articulations between children, socialization and Facebook. It is not our objective to analyse games thoroughly (we will analyse "Farmville" briefly), but to enter the universe in which children, representations, media and adults are related and intertwined. And in this path, we will analyse Facebook as the most important contemporary platform from which socialization, exhibition and competition are built by children as the main subjects of our research.

Key words

Play, games, children, Facebook

Introduction

Cards, dolls, cars, dice, cardboard, plastic, wood, alone, in groups or with adults: Play is a key aspect of the everyday lives of children all around the world. During childhood, play is undoubtedly a great organizer: the relationships with peers and with adults are frequently configured by and through the games children play during their social interactions.

In sum, play is a major activity for children as it is related to other crucial dimensions that we aim to analyse in this article. To reflect upon play and games is to think about possible childhoods in specific contexts. To analyse games is to locate us in a time and space of social experience that evolves with possibilities, limitations and desires (Mantilla, 1996). The exploration of the experiences that are built during and through games is the main focus of our research and also the aim of this work.

However, we cannot characterize the games children play as if it could be conceived beyond the specific conditions in which the players begin and end those games (Caillois, 1967 and Huizinga, 1938). That is, analysing games cannot be done without the considerations of both the specificities and limitations of each practice. This happens as childhoods are plural, dynamic but also uneven (Carli, 1999). The access to some goods, services and knowledge organize the relationship that boys and girls have with their environment. Childhoods, mentioned intentionally in plural, articulate and synthesize the possibilities and limitations that each kid has to be what he or she is (and of he or she cannot be) (Duek, 2013 and 2014). Education, culture, family and economic possibilities will be key factors to analyse not only the specific material background of each child but also the symbolic, the cultural particularities that are without a doubt related to education, knowledge and culture (Nunes, 2013, Brougère, 1998 and 2013).

The selection upon which we will organize this paper include children who live in big cities (in this case, the main focus is the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina), who go to public schools and who have at least one television set in their homes and a way (no matter which or where) to access the Internet (it can be in their houses, at a relative or friend's home, in public places, at schools, to name some of the most quoted places of access). The methodological construction of the sample we will present in this paper was made through snowball sampling (Stake, 2005) as it was really difficult to settle the interviews. This happened firstly because parents were the ones who negotiated the conditions of the interviews with their children and it tended to be very difficult for many of them to allow us (credited researchers but unknown to them) to enter their households and to record a certain amount of minutes of their child's speech. Once an adult allowed us to make the interview, they "recommended" us to friends of their child or of their own. This made it easier for us to contact parents and to build a sample with the methodological principle of Snowball (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Rubin and Rubin, 2004).

In addition, it is necessary to point out that the children we interviewed were part of the so called urban middle classes (see Caviglia, 2006; Antonelli, 2004; Minujin, 1997). We aimed to focus on middle classes so as to identify not only their practices and representations regarding games, play and the relationship with the market, but also with the desires they build in their everyday lives. Desires function, in our research, as a synthesis of the commercial discourses that surround social subjects and the ways through which the "needs"

are constantly built in varied supports. Urban middle classes are, for us, a very productive segment to question, to analyse and to reflect upon through the questions that organize this paper.

The interviews were made in the children's bedrooms and we asked them to pick one or two friends or relatives of their age to share the interview with. We had made a pilot study in 2009 (see Duek, 2011) in which we identified the need for children to have someone else in the interview moment so they could feel more at ease in an artificial communication scene (Bourdieu, 1999 and Meunier, Lambotte and Chuka, 2013).
After the interviews were made, the data was analysed using tools of the analysis of discourse focussing on the speech of the informants as key references of their practices, representations and desires built in and about the new devices and technologies of information and communication. We did not care whether what children said was "true" or "false", we analysed their speech as a way to enter the universe in which they build meaning around their actions and selections. The only ethical issue raised along the research was related to the protection of the identities of the informants that was very simple to do (by changing their names and particularities that could identify them). As the topics of the interviews were not "polemic" (games they played, preferences, remarks on social dimensions, to name some of the most relevant axis of the interviews), there were no further conflicts regarding ethical issues.

In sum, we will work on contemporary childhoods that have access to mass media content and, therefore, to their adds and offers. School, family and friends are crucial aspects of the everyday lives of these children (Lezcano, 1995 and Tedesco, 1995): Timing and family structure can vary but schools play a major role in the organization of habits, routines and schedules.
We said that we would explore the game experience in contemporary times (Rossi Cardoso, 2001 and Enriz, 2011) and, in order to do that, we need to define 'gates of entry'. We selected one major space from which children not only identify their game experiences but also, a platform that allows them to interact with peers and with adults that are close to them. The use of the social network Facebook unveiled a series of negotiations within the families that is not only interesting but also productive to analyse the relationship between children, parents, new technologies and devices. That is going to be the focus of the following pages.

Connected

In different surveys published during 2013, it is said that 75% of Argentine population is connected to the Internet. That is, in figures, almost 30 million people on line[1]. A shocking amount for a country as uneven as Argentina regarding the distribution of income on a macro-economic dimension. Of those 30 million, 8 have a broadband service. This means that the supply is never interrupted (except for possible technical problems). The same surveys locate Brazil and Argentina as the countries with the highest amount of hours on line per inhabitant compared with other Latin American countries (27, 2 and 26, 3 hours per month per person in

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[1] Pince Consulting, Cisco, Udesa, comScore, Ibope and UADE, to name some of the consultants that presented their figures.

both mentioned countries). According to comScore, Argentina is the country with the highest amount of hours on social networks in the world and Latin America, as a region, dedicates 56% more time to social networks than the average in the rest of the world.

All these figures locate us in a specific time and space: 7, 5 out of 10 boys and girls who live in Argentina, live in homes in which there is an Internet connexion. Even though there are differences and numbers might seem 'cold' and ineffective to illustrate social practices, what we want to emphasize is the important presence of new technologies of information and communication in both Argentina and Latin America. Children are growing up in homes that tend to be increasingly connected to new media and networks.

Smartphones with 3G (Internet data services) constitute a new space of connection to networks that coexist with game consoles that are available in the market ('PlayStation' in all its domestic and portable variations, Wii, Xbox, to name only the most successful devices regarding sales amounts). The connection to networks and the intensive use of its devices and potentialities have generated a great transformation in the communicative ecosystem (Martín-Barbero, 2003 and Buckingham 2007 and 2011) in which the everyday lives of children and adults is lived. In Argentina, in 2013, there were 52 million active mobile phone lines… for 40 million inhabitants. A shocking and yet possible tendency in the contemporary context and its possibilities.

What do we play to?

In this context, if we want to reflect upon the games and the ludic experience of contemporary childhoods on Facebook (Duek, 2013), it is impossible to displace the available devices in the analysis. Even more if they appear constantly in the word of our informants: during 2012 we made qualitative interviews to children between 6 and 10 years old, in the context of a research project (Project PICT 2010-1913 titled: 'Toys, consoles and electronic devices: New objects for new games? (An analysis of contemporary children's play) (ANPCyT and CONICET, Argentina). As we have already said, the interviews were made in pairs or trios. Interviews are, according to Bourdieu (1999) artificial situations in which two systems of representations encounter and tend to unveil a performance oriented towards the role that each participant imagines he or she has in the exchange (Goffman, 1974).

Computers and game consoles appeared immediately at the very beginning of the interviews as the major space in which children spent most of their out-of-school time. Facebook was, by far, the most mentioned platform when speaking about games and play. It is curious, as Facebook does not allow children under 13 to have an account. Nevertheless, the 'only' thing that has to be done is to forge the date of birth (assuming the user is older than 13) and then, without any checking nor controlling, a child under 13 can open an account. It is not such a difficult task to perform. But, in contrast to the adult use of the social network (see Tourn, 2013 and Molinari and Cantora, 2012), the main action performed on Facebook was 'playing games'. It is interesting to point out that 77% of Internet users in Argentina own a Facebook account, according to Social Bakers consultant.

> "I love Facebook games. They are sooooo cool! I love knowing the scores of my
> friends (…) and the rankings can be awesome… if I win" (Marcela, 8 years old).

Marcela is one of the girls we interviewed and she not only loves games on the social network but she identifies that there is a "plus" in knowing her friends' scores. One of the main characteristics of games on Facebook is that, among the people we are friends with, it builds a ranking according to performances. So, if two friends play the same game, whether they like it or not, there is going to be a notification about having beat someone or about being beaten by a "friend". That is why our informant remarks that it is better if she wins, and here comes the necessary clarification: she is not referring to having won the game nor having succeeded in a specific level; she is mentioning "win" associated to the performances of her friends.

Facebook games do not happen simultaneously as it does not matter when someone plays, the ranking is updated all day long and it enables users to compare and check constantly about them. Livingstone (2009) claims that the relationship between children and the Internet is complex and it relies on different aspects of their everyday lives: the relationship with peers, the role of the adults that surround them and the possibilities of understanding different aspects of life around them. It is in this direction that we are building an approach to Facebook and its uses and appropriations: that's where we found the most important distance regarding the relationship between children and their parents. After one of the interviews with two girls, the host's mother told us that she was worried about her kid having a Facebook account:

> "I am really scared that Daniela is using Facebook so much. I do not understand a lot about technology but I do know that there are a lot of risks out there for her (…) I saw a lot of cases in the news claiming that their children had been kidnapped or killed after contacting people on Facebook they did not know" (Rita, 39 years old, mother of Daniela, 9 years old).

The affirmations that Rita presented us on our way out of her house are not an exception: we heard different ways of stating the same fear along our research. And that is why it is fundamental to listen to the children's voices to understand not only what they do when they are on Facebook but to limit fears and panics that come from the adult world. Media, and television as a main actor (Hall, 1981 and Williams, 1974, among many others), are a very important variable to consider when analysing the social representations of the outside world. Gubern (2000) claims that media tend to build the *agora* as a hostile place and we tend to believe that we are better "inside", far from the possible dangers of the outside world. Television, as one of the main agents regarding social representations (Sepulchre, 2009) presents the *agora* as a space full of risks that we need to avoid. But, paradoxically, it also constructs the relationship between children and Facebook as a very dangerous one by synthesizing the creepiest cases that always end up in deaths, kidnaps and traffic of persons.

Rita's testimony is framed through a very close relationship with television and its discourses. Her fear is that her child could be caught by networks that do "bad things" to cute girls. It is interesting to quote what Daniela, her 9-year-old daughter told us about her relationship with Facebook:

> "What I do on 'Face'? I play. That's the thing that I love the most. I do not upload pictures… that for stupid teenagers. I'm only 9, you know? (Daniela, 9 years old).

Daniela refers to Facebook as "Face" indicating that there is a familiarity between her and the platform. But, contrary to her mother's fears, she states that what she loves doing the most on "Face" is playing games. This means that there is a very important distance between what the adult world fears and what children do when they are online. We are not saying that Facebook (or any type of connection) cannot be risky. It is necessary to know and talk to children about their uses and interactions online. But this specific case indicates that there is a gap between uses and fears that could be easily "filled" by speaking, by constructing a meaningful space for both Daniela and Rita in which they could share their thoughts, fears and panics. Daniela claims that she only plays on Facebook, that she identifies the platform with playing and this, if it were clear for her mother, should be enough to take her fears away (for the moment, of course).

These two testimonies illustrate a generational distance regarding Facebook use and the lack of parental guidance in relation to new technologies. But it also points out the tensions that are built around Facebook. On the following paragraphs, we will work on the concept of negotiation as it appeared to be a key aspect in the relationship between adults, children and the social network.

Negotiations

Boys and girls interviewed claimed they liked a lot the games on Facebook and that, in the majority of cases, parents did not allow them to open an account at the beginning but that, in the end, they managed to convince them using different persuasive tools and strategies. To be a 'friend' of their parents, to give them the password or to use their parents' Facebook account were the three most mentioned ways of intra-familiar negotiations. Parents, in the same direction as Rita's testimony, told us that they were scared of the exposition that comes with an account on this social network and that they considered the platform as a dangerous place that in a few clicks could put their children in complex and difficult situations. But they also said that they wanted to limit the time their children spent online: they were no longer worried about television as potentially addictive (see Duek, 2014) but they were afraid that online "life" could mean a decrease of school performance. That is, if their children spent a lot of time online, the fantasy is that they would not be able to study as they "should". The tension between expectations and fears regarding children's online activity is related to the lack of knowledge that parents identify. It is not that they do not know how things work on Facebook, but that they are not able to understand the uses that their own children give to these networks.

As Burke and Marsh (2013) say, there is a number of virtual worlds in which children not only play but also participate, learn and stay in touch with different aspects of contemporary culture. The notion of virtual world is very interesting to use it on Facebook as the proposal of the platform might seem to be the construction of a space that articulates time and relationships in one and only place on a global scale. The concept that Turkle (2012) associates to this process is "alone together": the dialectic relationship between being "always on" and being "always alone". The confusion between being connected *with* others and being with others is one of the dimensions that are encouraged by Facebook: we are lead to believe

that we have "friends" online and that we are "always accompanied". But we are not. Pahl (2003) says that friendship has many characteristics that might change according to the subjects in touch, but there is one general condition to it: there has to be a meaningful relationship between two or more subjects that sustain the bond in a dynamics that cannot be deprived of face to face contact.

The appropriation that our informants mention in relation to Facebook is also related to gender issues as Kafai (2000 and 2008) identifies. There are some games that appeared to be specifically designed to suit gender stereotypes. Games that aim to dress dolls or girls to make them "suitable" for marriages or that go to spas to get their body treated with different creams and unguents. But the ones that appeared the most in our interviews were the ones related to the "Sagas": "Farmville" and "Pet Rescue". Both games are oriented towards the others as necessary allies of the games. We are going to focus our analysis on "Farmville" as it is the second most played games on Facebook (Official Facebook statistics, 2014) and it appeared to be very relevant for our informants.

"I run a farm"

"Farmville" is organized through the construction of a farm and the seeds and plantations that are necessary to begin selling the production and, in consequence, to succeed in "business". "Farmville" is one of the most popular games (it is on the second "era" nowadays, which has perfected the previous one in many aspects but not in the main dynamics). The farm is a very demanding space and it needs constant care and here comes the key to all these groups of games: the only way of succeeding in running the farm is by exchanging "favours" with Facebook friends. To build the barn, we need bricks and they are available to be sent to friends if we invite or connect with them *through* the game. If we play "Farmville" the condition is that we have to have friends on Facebook that play it too. The cooperative dynamics of the game demands more and more friends online to exchange materials so as to improve the performance on the game. Farms grow and they diversify regarding the things it produces. The more it grows, the more it earns, the more it can buy in the virtual market of the game. If the "farmer" did not get enough money, he can put his credit card (the one in "real"/non-virtual world) and buy things with "real" money for the farm.

This action might seem outrageous but this game, developed by Zynga (one of the most important and powerful companies of the world of games), is a major success in the world of social network games. Children we interviewed said they loved this game because:

> "I love Farmville 2. I have a lot of cows and I harvest all the time. I am pretty good at administrating. Sometimes I ask my father for help as I do not understand some things of the game (…) I have more than ten friends that also play. I send them things, they click and I get a looooot of things for my beloved farm, awwww" (Camilo, 8 years old).
> "Farmville is great. I love the countryside and I live in a small apartment so I can imagine that I live there and that I run it. My friends play it so it is really easy to get the things I need" (Daiana, 7 years old)".

"Farmville" appears as a shared game with peers and that might help children learn how to administrate a farm. And it is necessary to point out how the proposal of the game appears reproduced in the word of children. The justifications of their preferences are organized in the same terms as the ones proposed by the game:

> "Farmville 2 is the best free online social game that allows you to become immersed in a vibrant 3D countryside where everything comes alive and reacts to every touch. You'll meet a variety of interesting characters and be able to play with friends as on a nostalgic journey to restore your childhood farm. Create, personalize and run your own farm where the crops they grow feed a variety of animals that provide resources for crafting. Beautiful trees, bountiful crops, and adorable animals grow wild!" (Official Zynga Webpage: http://zynga.com/game/farmville-two)

Create, personalize and run your own farm are the keys to understand the logic of the game that is, as we have already said, organized by the contacts players establish with their Facebook "friends". The game is based on the logics of Capitalism (accumulation, production, exploitation of the soil and maximization of income) that becomes "naturalized" for children since they begin playing. We are not saying that this game is a tool that aims to reproduce Capitalism, but we are focussing on the ways the productive system of the farm, even though it might seem "socialist" (the need of others to get the desired objectives), is oriented towards accomplishing Capitalist goals. Naturalization is, according to Hall (1981) one of the most problematic and yet important ideological effect regarding media. And that is what we want to remark about "Farmville" as an example of many different games that are available on line and that are played by millions of Facebook users all around the world.

"Look how great I am"

"Farmville" is not only about running a farm nor is it about sending "things" to other players: it is also about showing others our progress. Everything we do on the Facebook games can be "shared". Each accomplishment, each progress and each sell (in the case of this particular game) can be posted on our Facebook profile. It takes only one click to let others know what we are doing, what we did and what we are planning to do. The possibility of sharing information with others tends to reinforce the 'power' of ranking among children who play the same games. Many kids mentioned in the interviews that they when they beat a friend on Facebook games, they used that information to 'mock' the "victim" because of his/her performance at the game using all the available mechanisms of visibilization that Facebook enables and encourages:

> "I have the highest score, not of my class only, but of all he classes of the same year" (Ramiro, 8 years old).
> "Once I beat my best friend and I posted that on Facebook saying 'who's the best now?' (…) She was really upset and I said sorry to make thing better" (Silvana, 7 years old).

Status, acknowledgement and, in a special scale, power: a power that is both exhibited and enjoyed. "Look how great I am" synthesises both extracts. The second one had to apologize to her friend afterwards…but she did not hesitate to publish her score when she had to opportunity to show off. It is so simple to click and to exhibit our performances online that it

seems that the platform is "enabling" us to compete and display our performances as if they were relevant to our "friends".

To play games on Facebook is not only to be part of different rankings or to be 'mocked' by the ones who get the highest scores:pirouetteot affirm thrick or ility is a new characteristic of games. Since we all were young, the possibility of showing others it is the crucial space where power struggles among peers are organized according to the testimonies of our informants. To exhibit performances ends up being the most important part of the experience (Coban, 2014). The social dimension that these games enable displaces both the content and the dynamics of the games. Competition comes with visibility and it is this combination that seems to be a great part of the everyday life experience of contemporary children (Duek and Tourn, 2014).

It might seem that without exhibition there is no need to play, without the 'share' button, playing does not seem to be an interesting activity:

> "It wouldn't be so cool to play on Facebook if there is no way to share. That is the greatest thing about it: I know what my friends do and I can show them what I do all the time" (Carina, 9 years old).

However, we cannot affirm that visibility is a new characteristic of games. Since we all were young, the possibility of showing others a special movement, a trick or a *pirouette* encouraged us to achieve better results. We also wanted to win, to be the first in imaginary or 'real' rankings. The element that appears to us as new is the transformation of the scale and reach of these processes of visibilization. With two or three mouse clicks we can show hundreds of people what we can do, what we want to do or what we are trying to achieve. Everything seems to be potentially visible (Habermas, 1981) and we seem to be constantly encouraged to share more and more accomplishments from our everyday practices.

Conclusion

Play, exhibition and competition are articulated almost since the beginning of times. But the visibilization of the transformation comes with the words of our informants that claim that they choose to play on Facebook as they can see who plays each game and compete or try to follow other 'friends' on electronic environments (see Duek, 2014).
Sociability is one of the main elements to consider when analysing children's play on Facebook. *Tendencies*, as advertisers call them, seem to be located now on social networks and it is from that platform that many children show and experience part of the world around them. Facebook is one of the major spaces from which social subjects can build their 'faces' to show others. Social networks allow subjects to build 'faces' and 'masks' so as to be valued by others but also to be included in some exchanges.
In sum, Facebook is a major space from which children organize their bonds with others but also their expectations, accomplishments and games. Social networks are more than platforms from which they can be in contact: in many cases, Facebook is the place that might enable children to be in the peer groups they want to. That is why 'masks' and trends are so important and recurrent in the word of our informants.

It does not matter if the games change, the game dynamics proposed by Facebook seems to reproduce the same play conditions for the players: simple games, based on an interested exchange with the objective of producing more, better and more expensive. The logics of Capitalism, as we have already mentioned, are covered by a "mask" of collaboration and the need of other people's help. But behind all that, we find that the objectives of the game are not only individual but also exhibited on Facebook.

From the very beginning of this paper we identified Facebook games as a space that was identified by children for their interactions. Exhibition, competition and ranking are three axes of these types of games.

Contemporary children are born in a context in which media, screens and devices are present in different ways but that does not mean that they cannot have a critical approach to media, their content and representations (Livingstone, 2007). We have to accept that urban childhoods grow up inevitably between screens. But that does not mean that we, as adults, do not have a responsibility in questioning and approaching these types of games critically. We believe that it is necessary to speak to children and try to analyse *with* them the logics of the interaction encouraged by Facebook. We do believe that it is crucial to create a space in which children can exchange views with an adult who might help them noticing some strategies, ways of functioning and characteristics of online games and interactions. Enabling children to have a Facebook account should include a family time to share, analyse and discuss about what it means to interact through a social network with others and also reflect upon the limits and possibilities that Facebook allows us, as users, to do.

Games are a key aspect in the everyday lives of children and we need to understand that accompanying those games and spaces (online, offline, with devices and with the imagination) is another major responsibility that we have as adults. Games are an excuse to bond with others and to begin to understand the complex "communicative ecosystem" in which we all live. That is why we need to help children create critical categories from which they could be users but with a certain amount of categories with which they could reflect upon their own practices.

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