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Wireless Children

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Abstract

There is an agreement in the education sciences literature according to which children's life is strongly influenced by the virtual space; under such circumstances, children get information and skills which are not really used in school. Starting from the assumption that there is a rewards and punishments system functioning in school, our purpose was to find out if such a system works within computer games; in the next stage our purpose was to find out if there are common elements between the two systems of rewards and punishments, that is those from school and those from computer games.

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1. Wireless Children

Nowadays it has become quite common to talk about children abandoned to the virtual environment; these children are abandoned, somewhat paradoxically, while living with their family and enjoy all that it can offer as a compensation for carelessness and emotional abandon.

Gadgets represent the present currency to soothe the conscience, moreover, offering justifications socially accepted as an explanation for the child's undesirable behavior - the Internet should be blamed for it! In other words, children are abandoned to the network, resources and temptations which it has.

In such a context, the key question is: are the school and the virtual environment homogeneous in terms of the experiences the child has access to or are these environments rather divergent? A first response may include a partial overlap between the school environment and the virtual environment as schools (more) frequently incorporate specific elements of the virtual environment (there are educational software, teachers and schools have Facebook pages and websites, some courses are conducted using the blended-learning system, etc.).

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But incorporation of specific elements of the virtual environment does not change the characteristics of the school environment: "... Homo sapiens believes that school is rather a meeting place for friends than a learning environment. School does not challenge them enough to learn and it face the risk of being disconnected from its audience. School represents one of the focal points of students' daily life, but it is not the most important. It is as if school is completely different from the rest of their lives, like another world completely different from the rest of contacts and activities." (Veen & Vrakking, 2011)

Things are completely different in the virtual environment, where there is connectivity, control, the possibility to work in a team with more or less known people, but who share the same concerns and interests: "Digital Natives live in a reality in which they control the environments, whether they are games or social networks, there are almost no rules. You're the one who creates your own rules and there is no right or wrong, good or bad. In this way, they are constantly encouraged to experiment and play" (Dumitrescu, 2013)

If we restrict cyberspace just the video game world, its key feature is immersion, the absorption of children in the (virtual) game reality: "... children become absorbed by computer games - assuming the role of the personality they play and acting according to its characteristics. Players become absorbed in a virtual world, turning it into a real one while playing. These three characteristics of virtual games – to be active, to be in control and to be absorbed – are crucial for their motivation to continue playing very complicated games" (Veen & Vrakking, 2011)

The educational guidance cannot function effectively (despite the position taken by Alfie Kohn for example) in the absence of the doublet rewards/punishments. This is why we decided to analyze the homogeneity of the two environments (school and virtual) in terms of practical ways to use rewards and punishments; specifically, we reduced the virtual environment just to video games, starting from the assumption that the difference between the school environment and the virtual one reaches the maximum in such case.

2. Research methodology

The study targeted a group of forty computer gamers (twenty men and twenty women) with an average age of twenty-three years. The questionnaire was administered online and included 14 questions that focused on the respondents' experiences in the gaming world and the school world, emphasizing the penalties/rewards pair; at the same time, the respondents were asked to compare the two environments – games and school – in terms of the use of penalties/rewards pair; the respondents were also asked to only specify their age and gender. The questionnaire was released online and the respondents were asked to specify the age and gender only. We also mention that references to the rewards/punishments system from schools are based on previous research.

3. About rewards

The gamification phenomenon involves at first the ubiquity of incentives in computer games; in this respect, Serge Tisseron notes: "Even the smallest performance is rewarded. If a beginner kills a rat that passes him with a sword, all of a sudden he will receive a message saying that "the ability to wield weapons" increased by one point. Even a sound is heard to confirm this. All the senses of the happy player are stimulated. His ego is increased, there is only one wish: to continue the game." (Tisseron, 2010)

Our research partly contradicts the idea of the omnipresence of incentives in games, as well as the idea of using them sporadically within the school; thus, on a scale from 1 to 5, the responses to the question "do games contain elements that you consider to be rewards?" response rated 2.1 for women and 2.5 for men (fig.1); at the same time, on the same scale from 1 to 5, the question regarding the frequency of rewards in games, recorded scores of 1.9 for women and 2.5 for men (fig.2); finally, the responses to the question "do rewards occur more rarely or more frequently in games than at school?" rated 3 for women and 3.9 for men (fig.3).

These responses confirm the greater use of incentives in computer games than in school, but, at least apparently, school seems to make up for this loss; in fact, research on the degree of using rewards in school shows that most children perceive the grade either as a reward (if the grade is good), or as a punishment (if it is bad).

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