Videogames and Critical Media Literacy in Family Contexts in Norway

SUMMARY

The main aim of this research and development project was to generate new knowledge about the critical media understanding among young people, parents and in family contexts in Norway. The specific aims were to:

   a. explore young people's and parents' socio-cultural and technological media competence with a focus on computer games.

   b. develop tools/resources to strengthen children's critical media understanding and parents' ability to regulate computer gaming

   c. facilitate the participation of children, parents, and subject experts in the research process

   d. contribute to the development of a conceptual and methodological framework for critical media understanding

An interdisciplinary approach is pursued in this study with perspectives from media science, consumption research, youth research, worldview theory and the New Literacies field. The project's understanding of media competence is taken from the Norwegian Media Authority's definition of critical media as "skills and knowledge that people need to make well-informed choices about media content that they consume, create or share".[1]

The project's main target groups are children and young people aged 10-19 as well as parents. The context is family everyday experiences regarding video game literacies, and the informants come from both ethnic Norwegian backgrounds, blended families and families with immigrant backgrounds. The project uses a participatory action research methodological approach consisting of focus group interviews and workshops. In addition, the project engages in dialogue with relevant players in the industry. The project's ambition is to build new knowledge about media competence and to develop targeted tools and resources for children and parents in the family context, as well as being relevant for the leisure sector and other arenaes.

The project is based on results from relevant previous projects, funded by The Norwegian Media Authority (RAM), on the subject of video gaming, media use, regulation and problematic gaming prevention as the focus is on children and young people and in family contexts. These previous projects have focused on, among other things, video game habits, identity construction and belonging, gender issues, conflict and video game regulation. The studies also touch on how families negotiate and interact with commercial aspects of video games. In this project, we go a step further by exploring state of young people's and parents'

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[1] https://www.medietilsynet.no/digitale-medier/kritisk-medieforstaelse/dette-er-kritisk-medieforstaelse/

critical media competence that includes skills-sets, knowledge and attitudes towards the complex socio-technical and cultural dimensions of their everyday video games experiences.

The following findings have emerged from the study:

a. Youth and parents participated in video gaming as a family bonding and social activity in several families. This occurred mostly when the children were younger. During such occasions, interactions and dialogue, knowledge exchange, learning and 'critical media literacies' were gained easier and more effortless. The parental participation enabled parents to understand the workings of video games which also contributed to less conflict when it comes to regulation.

b. As parents, the perception of video games as time-consuming and therefore needing their input as regulators was evident. Some of the parents were also concerned with issues such as vulgar language, age-limit and inappropriate content. This understanding resulted into different ways of solving the problem, with some choosing dialogue, others choosing more authoritarian and top-down approaches like switching off the internet or forbidding play, while others decided to use filters, rules, and so on. In such cases avenues for critical media literacy were shut down.

We also learnt that some parents, particularly newcomers with immigrant backgrounds, due to lack of language skills or knowledge about systems in Norway, often restricted video gaming or disengaged from the issues. The new scenario with video games (learning about and regulating the unknown) was considered scary. In such scenarios, there was no room for critical media literacy.

Despite the challenges above, several parents experienced video games as positive activities in their children's and their family's social life. Perspectives on positive understandings of video games obtained through experiences included: family and youth socialization, children's well-being and mental health, as well as the well documented positive factors such as collaboration, making friends, learning new skills, strategic thinking and more. But while these new literacies were evident for parents, they showed limited literacy on issues particularly related to the political economy of video games, algorithms and how that affects everyday video game experiences.

c. Regarding youth, similar experiences as parents on literacies were observed. The youth showed an understanding of the pros and cons of video gaming but limited insights into the role and importance of political-economy of video games. Among the positive understandings was the role of the video games regarding socialization, making friends, escaping everyday challenges and being good at something (mastery) as well as the possibility to experiment with identity and belonging. The negative

understandings included the fact that video games were time-consuming and also that some parents did not understand video games and were unnecessarily strict.

d. As a general observation, the research process engendering participatory approaches was experienced as a significant critical media literacy opportunity for both parents and youth because through the questioning and dialogue, they were forced to think and reflect critically about these topics. The methodology on specifically tailored workshop activities was particularly fruitful for the youth, who experienced these as an opportunity to raise their awareness. Through the tasks and plenary sessions afterwards, they were able to gain practical understandings of important topics such as algorithms, privacy, production aspects of video games and more. Much of this knowledge was either taken for granted or not thought about.

The knowledge gaps among the target groups led to the development of resources and tools for parents and youth as well as other relevant stakeholders. These include:

a. Guide for parents, teachers and others with step-by-step instructions and activities on how to promote critical media/game literacy with a focus on video games.

b. VR 360/Escape Room for youth with tasks aimed at testing and challenging young people to think critically on issues such as algorithms, technology, privacy and more. The virtual room was prepared by the project partners Nasjonal Digital Læringsarena (NDLA) and has a focus on critical media literacy in video games as well as social media contexts.

c. The project contains a range of dissemination activities from scientific publication of results to conference presentation and popular versions of disseminating research findings as indicated in this report.