

Narrative, Games and the Oral Literacy Revolution

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Abstract

The author discusses how the Yu-Gi-Oh story as observed in her doctoral fieldwork lays the scaffold for children to moralise, develop higher order learning strategies and language that they normally would not attempt. The power of storytelling as a learning tool was harnessed in the past- particularly during Greek and Roman periods and by many religions throughout history. Heroes, Gods and superheroes have given exemplar and role model narratives to children that teach the values of society. The recent roles of superheroes have been both as tools of propaganda and to allow children to role play, creating narratives of good verses evil. These recent roles as well as the way in which superheroes have been pushed underground to create alternative sub-cultures are metaphorically demonstrated in Disney's recent animation *The Incredibles* (2005). It seems that media saturated subcultures developed and marketed by companies like Konami, the makers of Yu-Gi-Oh, are using the superhero narrative but in a multi-media, multi-sensual way to create stimulating world that allows children to participate and adapt the story as it progresses. As the child becomes more skilled using the shared knowledge, understandings, skills and language of the game they become immersed and a part of the narrative and associated sub-culture.

The narrative building developed by these games is based upon oral literacy. The children orally interweave their stories of the monsters as dialogue between one another as the game progresses. These stories are based upon the characterizations developed by the creators of Yu-Gi-Oh and the children's characters they create, but always guided by the stringent rules provided by the game. This whole process has implications for teaching and learning in the classroom as well as the development of ideological structures within society, over time.

Introduction

“I did without your special gifts your oh so special powers. And when I’ve finished saving the world I’ll sell my inventions and everyone will be able to be super. And when everyone’s super no one will be.” Syndrome, The Incredibles (Warner Bros., 2005)

The movie “The Incredibles” (Warner Bros 2005) looks at the role of the superhero in modern society. The life of the Incredibles is analogical to the sub-culture of young boys playing Yu-Gi-Oh, a many-media game produced by the Japanese company Konami. Syndrome wants to destroy superheroes by making everyone a superhero. Yu-Gi-Oh wants everybody to be a superhero but also retaining the status that goes with it. Kim Balnaves, the author, is currently completing a doctoral thesis on how boys use Yu-Gi-Oh to 'world build' and become superheroes. Yu-Gi-Oh is a popular television show globally, particularly with boys 7-15 years of age. The television show and associated games of Yu-Gi-Oh have cross-cultural appeal. Companies like Konami, however, have recognised that the game is more than a game, it is a transformational activity that allows boys to break out from societal norms in a way that other games do not.

The narrative of Yu-Gi-Oh is reminiscent of the superhero and god tales in Roman and Greek mythology. The stories from these historical periods as well as Egyptian heroes are referred to throughout the adventures of Yu-Gi-Oh. In the game of Yu-Gi-Oh children can participate in the narrative through playing the game and taking on the roles of the characters, both villains and heroes through using their cards. They are given the ability to create their own world and the characters within it. The movie “The Incredibles” (Warner Bros, 2005) looks at the role of the superhero in modern life and in many ways metaphorically depicts the role of games like Yu-Gi-Oh in modern society. This paper using anecdotal evidence from the fieldwork discusses the role of the new superheroes for children in our society and how these superhero tales develop the motivation for children to develop higher order learning concepts through narrative and oral literacy.

The role of narrative in myth and ritual

The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairytale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” ... is not essentially “escapist,” nor “fugitive.”

J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*

In his 1939 Oxford lecture, *On Fairy Stories*, Tolkien created the word eucatastrophic as the opposite of tragedy in drama, as Tolkien held there was no word for the opposite of tragedy. A comedy for example can be a comedic tragedy. A true fairy story narrative always has the ‘Consolation of the Happy Ending’ (Tolkien 1977). Fairy stories, however, are not defined by any elf or fairy, ‘but upon the nature of Faërie: the Perilous Realm.’ (1977).

Syndrome, the villain in *The Incredibles* movie is a normal person who wants to be a superhero and invents contraptions that enhance his normal physical abilities. His aim is to threaten the world and at the same time save it, showing he is a superhero. But he also wants to make everyone a superhero so there are no superheroes. *The Incredibles* is interesting from this paper’s perspective as it mirrors much of what is going on with digital narratives and children in the modern industrial state. Yu-Gi-Oh is one of the digital narratives available to children to use to break out of the mould of “normal”. In *The Incredibles* the superheroes are perceived by society to be too expensive to support (because of legal actions from collateral damage to citizens and covering up identities). The superheroes are consequently returned to ‘normal life’- everyone is normal, even though Bob, the main character and a superhero, covertly goes out and helps people. When Syndrome, the want-to-be superhero, threatens society, the superheroes return to save society and are thanked as a result. They return to the position where they are normal but allowed to be super-normal at certain defined times by society (eg threat).

Heroes, myth and ritual are also in an interesting position in our society. These narratives are seen as difficult and not able to fit into a child's often crowded "real life" of mathematics, literacy and sports. However children manage to become heroes and make spaces for these narrative roles themselves through their games such as Yu-Gi-Oh. Turner, the anthropologist, coined the term 'liminal', from the Latin *limina* for 'threshold', to describe transitional phases where myths and rituals became important in confirming the identity of a person and their future role in society. Myths involving superheroes created worlds that allowed children to break free of societal constraints and return to society with a deeper understanding of themselves and their role within the society. Or as Turner (1979:576) explains:

'Myth treats of origins but derives from transitions Myths relate how one state of affairs became another; how an unpeopled world became populated; how chaos became cosmos; how immortals became mortal; how the seasons came to replace climate without seasons ... and so on. Myths are liminal phenomena: they are frequently told at a time or in a site that is "betwixt and between".'

Myths and rituals, in traditional and non-traditional societies, are often associated with 'rites of passage' from one status to another. There is a separation (divestiture) phase, a transition (liminality) phase and an incorporation (investiture) phase (Turner, 1995). During the separation phase, the person who is to be subjected to the passage becomes separated from their previous way of life. During the transition phase, the person separated from their previous environment experiences the liminal condition. During the incorporation phase they enter a new group and a new life. This concept is developed by Turner (1982:24):

'The ritual subjects pass through a period and an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few ... of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states' .

The new hero narrative

The classic hero narrative is one where there is marked change in the hero, when costumes and obvious superpowers appear. In the modern narratives in these new games, however, it is often difficult to define which stories contain heroes and which do not. It would appear that with the decline of the liminal period in social development (age compression) and the associated change in society the superhero is also changing form, the narratives becoming more subtle, the heroes becoming closer to normal people with more subtle powers and costumes.

The Incredibles is a story that parodies the demise of superheroes in modern society perfectly. There is no longer any room for children to enter the 'liminal' phase there is nowhere out of the net of societal norms. The movie makes us look at what happens to people (everyone has a superhero inside of them) when the superhero is contained by society - they become fat, depressed and slovenly because the red tape has stopped them living life to the full. Their mental ability becomes dulled and self esteem destroyed. The children never realize what powers they do possess and live life denying what, given a liminal space, they could contribute to real life. In *The Incredibles* the family has to actually escape from society and go to a deserted island to do this and they come back to society a renewed and completely changed family.

As Tolkien knew, all children need world building narratives and hero stories as a way of acting out the liminal space, or as Vygotsky (1962) saw it rehearsing the language and scenarios for when it is their turn to take on this role. However as society has changed we have seen the demise of the Superhero. Wonderwoman has been replaced with Buffy. Superman and Batman have been replaced with Yu-Gi-Oh and Ash from Pokemon. The special tight leotards are gone, the outfits are cool and hip but not transformative, they have special powers but they are subtle and they enter and go between the realms frequently. For example in Batman once he transformed he rarely changed back during that particular episode. However, with the modern heroes the narrative changes from one realm to another regularly. Good and evil remain the same, the transformative effect is

still the same, but it is not the society it is the thought patterns and the hero that change. Sponge Bob Square Pants parodies the role of the hero for children in everyday life. Is Sponge Bob a modern day superhero? He was in the latest Sponge Bob movie. He was transformed by the Sea Princess when she put a seaweed moustache on him, and suddenly he was in possession of superpowers. However when the moustache fell off, he realised he had possessed these powers all along.

Yu-Gi-Oh research

Buckingham (2002) proposes that if teachers can understand what engages children in the games they play, they would be better placed to offer them more stimulating learning experiences. This broad proposition is the basis of this PhD study being conducted by the author. However, this study aims expressly at understanding the underlying *sub-culture* associated with the players of these games. There is currently no research available that investigates the Australian context of the sub-culture of children's digital media games and the impact it has on the children playing them. Ito (2005) has conducted an ethnographical investigation of the sub-culture of Yu-Gi-Oh in Japan from an anthropological perspective. If the culture that children are participating in whilst playing the games of MSS was understood, teachers could potentially engage them in more relevant learning experiences by trying to replicate this culture in the classroom. This is the specific proposition underpinning this study. More explicitly, the question being investigated by this study is: 'What is it about the media-saturated sub-culture of young boys that so engrosses them and what can we adopt or adapt from this culture to improve their educational outcomes?'

To address this question, a group of twenty-five 7 to 12 year old children were observed twice a week over six months playing Yu-Gi-Oh in a mixed media environment. The phenomenon of Yu-Gi-Oh has considerable currency and popularity at present. These children, all of whom were already immersed in the game, were selected from a large group of enthusiastic volunteers from a primary school located in Perth, Western

Australia. The children were evenly distributed across the age range, and the majority of them were boys.

Although the periods during which the children played Yu-Gi-Oh were supervised, they were left to participate naturally within this environment. The intention was to observe, in a minimally intrusive manner, their interactions and to develop an understanding of their perceptions and points of view, both during sessions and in between sessions. The fieldwork produced diaries, audio-tapes, interviews and observations about the children's participation within the study. Put simply, this study was interested in the phenomenon of the children's 'engrossment' in the MSS of Yu-Gi-Oh. To achieve this, it was necessary that this research engaged in the emergent discovery of the MSS of Yu-Gi-Oh through the eyes of informant participants. To this end, the research design adopted Phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) as its philosophical and methodological framework. It used a dialogical approach in the analysis and interpretation of their interactions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To facilitate this, an analytical framework was developed prior to the fieldwork. This analytical tool was based on an extensive literature review in the areas of culture, media, and boys in education (Buckingham, 2002; Lambevski, 1998; Spradley, 1979; Turner, 1973). The framework consisted of a range of possible behavioural indicators associated with children's media sub-cultures. One of the strongest themes to emerge from the data collected was the notion of world-building and the importance of the "hero narrative" story. Both of these were central to the children maintaining motivation, ownership and learning the complex strategies, vocabulary and rules associated with the game.

The power of oral literacy and narrative

"In written speech, we are obliged to create the situation, to represent it to ourselves. This demands detachment from the situation." (Vygotsky 1962:99) The differentiation identified by Vygotsky between written and oral speech is demonstrated by the way children play Yu-Gi-Oh. They detach from the real world. Then they take on a character role and create the explanatory narrative for the world the character is participating in. During the fieldwork the study this was a necessary component to participate in the

game, both in the oral telling of the story as they played the game and the written artifacts produced between sessions.

“There are important functional distinctions in speech. One of them is the distinction between dialogue and monologue; oral speech in most cases is dialogue.” (Vygotsky 1962:142)

“You, superheroes always have to have the monologue....” (Syndrome, The Incredibles)

Vygotsky notes in *Thought and Language* (1962) that written language is more difficult for a child to develop than oral language due to the deliberate thought processes involved in writing. He also makes the observation that the monologue is the precursor to writing. He discusses the notion that to monologue the child does not automatically respond to another child’s cue but will think, structure, moralise and self evaluate as they talk. Children will frequently do this as they role play, just as Syndrome points out superheroes do. In the fieldwork involving the game of Yu-Gi-Oh this was frequently seen as children played the hero, chose the cards and justified their choices. When asked why they did this “monologuing” during a game one of the boys said:

“I find when I’m playing this game I automatically talk faster- my voice sounds different. I think it’s because my brain’s working faster and my words have to keep up.” (M 10)

This boy felt that as he talked it was almost as if the hero role he was playing took over – it was not “*the normal me*” talking. Through participating in these games these children wrote some very detailed diary entries of the narratives and roles they had participated in during the games. This demonstrates the power of the use of the oral narrative in the development of written literacy. Foucault’s conception that ‘*language never deceives or reveals*’ – rather, ‘*Language, it is played. The importance, therefore, of the notion of the game*’ (1998:84). Is relevant in that although the boy felt he was taking on another role and using the narrative language of another person he was rehearsing the language of the culture he was participating in and analyzing and evaluating himself through another’s eyes.

The artifacts relationship to the digital media narrative

The artifacts generated by Yu-Gi-Oh are numerous. Most of them are manufactured by the Yu-Gi-Oh merchandising companies (Konami, Disney, Upperdeck and Shonen Jump). However as children become immersed in the game they begin to produce their own replica and combined artifacts. These created artifacts consisted of self-created cards, narratives, posters, powerpoint slideshows, databases, costumes and new games. The cards that the children created had new monsters, spells etc on them or were cards that featured themselves. They also developed alternative narratives either written or acted out. During the fieldwork these were often done cooperatively and were instigated by a gameplay (cards) or a dvd of an episode of the story. Often after the fieldwork participants would use this as a means of personal reflection, a way of making meaning of the events during the session.

The children involved in the game and the creation of the narrative of Yu-Gi-Oh value the artifacts as they bring them into the world of the characters and allow them to participate in the narrative of the creation of the hero with greater insight and strategy. To anyone not participating in the narrative the artifacts are meaningless. This is demonstrated when talking to the parents of the children participating in the game: *“I don’t know why we pay so much for a set of cards- \$39.95 for 30 pieces of cardboard- Konami must be raking in a fortune, but my son would spend every cent we had on them if he could- and he treats them like gold as well!”* (Parent). This is corroborated by another parent; *“I picked some of JB’s cards off up the floor and through them in the bin to make a point- he was soo angry- I thought they were only a couple of cards and didn’t think it would upset him so much but apparently they were super rare monster cards that he would never be able to replace...”*

Even to the children participating in the development of the narrative the cards are valued differently. The value is individually placed according to the superhero role the child is taking on and the storyline they are following through their creation of their “deck” of cards. As an example of this: A tin set retails for \$49.95. This consists of a tin to store the cards in and one guaranteed rare and powerful card. It also has five “booster packs” in it. A “booster pack” has eight cards in it- they are randomly packaged but from a particular

series. So if you get a “Monsters from the Dark Realm” booster pack the cards will all be from that series of Yu-Gi-Oh. Each series generates five thousand cards. The pack contains eight randomly chosen cards from the five thousand possible- it is like a lucky dip. Each card has different values and powers and combines with other cards in different ways so the value you place on the cards you get from the ‘booster pack’ is largely determined by the type of cards already collected. This value system has interesting results in that it promotes the ‘swapping’ behaviour often associated with collectables but in a different way as there is no one ascribed set value of each card. What might be extremely powerful in one child’s deck might not be in another child’s deck. The following conversation between two of the participants makes this clear:

“What you’re giving away that Kubioh?” (HB9)

“Yeah, why, what do you want with that little furball- he’s only got 200 attack points?” (CR 10)

“I’ve got a card he can multiply with- he can be a real pest if you use him the right way.” (HB9)

OK. What will you swap for him?” (CR10)

Without the original artifacts there is no shared understanding of the hero’s world. However with varied use of original artifacts and the creation of new individualised artifacts the child can become the hero in his own narrative and have that confirmed by others participating in the same world-building story.

Conclusion

Any child can transform himself to being a hero through narrative. Games with narratives such as Yu-Gi-Oh can be adapted and participated in by children allowing them to take on the roles of heroes and villains. The narrative allows normal personal limitations to be defied. Children are bound by the constraints of red tape and thought patterns that bind every normal person participating in a normal society.

Companies like Konami have recognized the world-building and liminal nature of its games and how children can be brought into hero transformations in the liminal state.

The liminal state in the modern world is not a defined period as it is in traditional societies, with a transition to a particular status or role. The phenomenon of age compression and the profit desire to have people playing games for a lifetime leads to the Situationist's New Urbanism, but with a twist. For the Situationist play would replace profit. The modern 'new play' is, though, primarily profit driven.

The going into and out of the betwixt and between state is now frequent, for the hero and for the real person in the real world being the hero (as in games like Yu-Gi-Oh). The world-building games of the modern era do not "destroy Superheroes by making everyone a Superhero" as Syndrome (The Incredibles) predicted. Instead they make everyone able to be the only superhero in their own narrative.

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