ABSTRACT
The approach of this article is centered on the concepts of digital competence and new narrative formats. We aim to apply these dimensions to the videogame «Dragon Age Origins», winner of the 2009 videogame of the year award. Its features—plot, characters and interactivity—make it ideal reading material in other formats and are highly motivational for young people. The development of digital competence signifies new literacy, and it is necessary to find new stimulating resources that combine the fun and formative dimensions. Equally relevant are multimodal texts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), especially new narrative formats that imply social progress, as the ways of reading are different. The texts have acquired new formats with the same quality as books but they sometimes motivate users more. This is the case of «Dragon Age Origins», a dark heroic fantasy role-playing game set in a unique world containing a story to be read and experienced. Our analysis of the videogame discusses whether it should be considered a form of reading or not.

RESUMEN
Este artículo tiene como ejes conceptuales la competencia digital, la literacidad y los nuevos formatos narrativos. El aprendizaje permanente incluye las mismas como claves de la formación de la persona y sobre todo, como elemento que va a contribuir a su inserción en una sociedad dinámica y cambiante. Tras analizar dichas dimensiones, las mismas serán reflejadas en el videojuego denominado «Dragon Age: Orígenes», galardonado con el premio juego de rol del año en el año 2009. El desarrollo de la competencia digital conlleva una nueva alfabetización y en la misma es preciso hallar recursos motivadores para que dicha adquisición sea a la vez una cuestión lúdica y formativa. Otro aspecto relevante que será tratado en el texto tiene que ver con la multimodalidad textual (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), sobre todo con los nuevos formatos narrativos. Este hecho supone un importante avance social ya que las formas de lectura varían apareciendo formas distintas más motivadoras para el usuario pero no por ello poseen menor calidad. Éste es el caso de «Dragon Age: Orígenes», un juego de rol basado en la fantasía heroica ubicado en un mundo novedoso. Dicho juego se convierte en una excelente historia para ser leída y experimentada.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE
Competencias básicas, comunicación digital, software, videojuegos, ficción, lectura, alfabetización tecnológica.


Competencia digital y literacidad: nuevos formatos narrativos en el videojuego «Dragon Age: Orígenes»

Basic competences, digital communication, software, videogames, fiction, reading, technological literacy.
1. Lifelong learning: new competences for a dynamic and changing society

In 2005, the Council of Europe listed eight key competences related to lifelong learning. Communication in the mother tongue; communication in a second language; numeracy and competence in Science and Technology; digital competence; learning to learn; interpersonal and civic competence; initiative and cultural expression (European Commission, 2005). Former EC president Jacques Delors (1996) had previously viewed education as a heritage issue that became the basis of this lifelong learning philosophy.

We are now aware of these competences and our aim is to develop and promote them. These competences are defined as a combination of knowledge, abilities and attitudes adapted to this context. People need them for personal development, active citizenship and social inclusion. Escamilla (2009) explains that the genesis of this approach is related to a «how» concept to be applied to different contexts in people’s lives: domestic, social, academic and work.

This reclaimed autonomy must be highlighted in a society where people are bombarded by materialistic stimuli. The educational community should accept this and try to combine capitalism with the idea of a civic education (Bolivar, 2003). The new educational paradigms must be updated, which may mean that we have to develop the aforementioned competences as part of people’s education.

Nowadays, digital literacy is in demand in study programs (this refers to levels of education). This aim is honourable although, as Aguaded (2010) explains, it requires a progressive process of implementation. We cannot ignore the importance of a non-formal educational context. This is the objective of this article, as we try to incorporate elements from the social field to the development of digital competence and literacy. This article aims to contribute suitable alternatives to digital literacy.

2. Digital competence

Tourinian (2004) explained that digital education was a challenge for the digital society in schools since it required a technical knowledge and a strategic objective for innovation in the field of Pedagogy. Digital literacy is now a challenge that has been met but the fact remains that we do not know whether technology can be incorporated in education. The concept we refer to as digital competence could be defined as follows: «Digital competence implies a safe and critical use of the Information Society Technologies (IST) for work, entertainment and communication purposes» (European Commission, 2005: 18).

It refers to a skill related to the acquisition, assessment, production, presentation or exchange of information or the possibility of participating in communication networks through the use of the Internet. We firmly believe that this competence should be part of digital education (e-Education) in which the abilities, habits, attitudes and knowledge that help people to exist, move, learn or interact in the digital dimension will be developed. Does this mean that this new configuration will substitute traditional literacy? No. The idea is that we continue benefiting from both.

Digital literacy, or the development of this competence, implies that people will be able to apply their IST knowledge to ordinary life situations. It is our aim to make these resources useful, either as a word processor or as a tool for creativity and innovation. Our text goes further by exploring fictional worlds (videogames). These are useful tools that help us understand young people’s interests, to understand diversity or even develop multiple intelligences (Montero & Ruiz Díaz, 2010). We focus on a videogame in which linguistic and literary abilities converge, and the concept of digital literacy deployed is developed in the following section.

3. Digital literacy

Understanding literacy as the condition of being able to read and write implies a basic understanding but we must take into account that we are using technological resources like the video game as an electronic text? Of course, it is another kind of digital literacy. Cassany (2000) points out that social values and ways of thinking are added to this knowledge and attitudes. Thus, the term literacy requires an expansion of this basic definition, the reading and writing of not only printed but also digital texts. Traditionally, we consider reading to mean hard copy, but what happens with other formats that contain stories and texts? Is it possible to consider the videogame an electronic text? Of course, it is another kind of reading but the development of this skill is similar, and some specific knowledge is required in order to understand the messages and the whole story.

It is necessary to refer to the concept of digital competence and connect it to electronic literacy. This is a live issue since, when considering learning languages or literature, certain changes and resources taking place in our society must be taken into account. Technology is a reality and it is our duty to find
suitable ways to make the best use of it, and not just as entertainment. Digital literacy is a new challenge for educators and, of course it has several potentially worthwhile characteristics which must be exploited.

Reinking (1992) sites the interaction between readers and texts as one such characteristic. An active user is a motivated user. This is one of the biggest drawbacks of hard copy texts for young people. Another characteristic indicated by Reinking (1992) is that electronic texts may contain different structures. Videogames are ideally structured to develop different skills. If we select games with more content than an arcade perspective, we have material that is strong enough to motivate young people to acquire and maintain the reading habit. Previous experiences in language teaching, that of Sherzer and Warschauer (2000) for instance, show us how this digital literacy can be fostered in ways that will also enhance young people's ability to learn to read printed texts. Indeed, an interesting new line of research would be to focus on how students approach writing and reading in hypertexts.

4. The videogame: beyond entertainment

When analyzing what a videogame is, we associate it with the field of entertainment. A definition that corroborates this point is: «A digital game with entertainment objectives, which uses computer technology and allows player interaction with the machine in real time, and in which action is fundamentally developed with visual support (on the screen of a portable console, a personal computer, a television or another support)» (Tejeiro & Del Río, 2003: 20).

Is it possible to believe in videogames that contribute to people's education with their various dimensions? From our point of view it is possible. It is true, as Gómez del Castillo (2007) points out, that videogames are based on competition, on being the best, the most extreme in violence, sexism and racism, and triumphing in economic environments. This may well be the most generalized opinion people have about them.

But there are other ways of designing videogames that offer the user challenging stories, because the abilities they have to develop are related to cognitive, reading and decision-making aspects. Montes Pérez (2010: 48) establishes a difference between a graphic adventure and a role-playing game. Both are videogames but the first is limited, while a role-playing game is characterized by the importance of creating the character and the way he acts, as well as the freedom of action the user is given when playing.

Our choice is a role-playing videogame whose main characteristics derive from what is known as interactive fiction. Basically, this is computer-mediated narrative. In hard copy texts, it would resemble the kind of stories that offer the readers the possibility of choosing their own adventure. The user must read a short text and then has to choose the course of action he wants the main character to take. In the case of Dragon Age Origins, the story will vary depending on the instructions given by the user, as well the number of characters involved and even the plot itself. Interactive fiction requires the text-analysis skills of a literary scholar, so the skills are developed by means of a different format. The structure of this game would probably be more sophisticated than the typical fantasy novel.

Another relevant issue with the new formats is that the role-playing game enhances communication among players. As in reading forums, gamers can chat about the game and share problems and experiences so as to move the story forward.

This is a kind of immersion in a fictional world and at the same time an interaction with a virtual reality. Dragon Age Origins could be a hard copy book but has the advantages of a videogame (graphics, music, interaction, etc.).
5. New narrative formats

The concept of interactive fiction means that its application is different, above all due to morphological diversity. There will be variations depending on the author and the content. However, it is possible to establish a common point: interactivity. This changes the way fiction is perceived since, thanks to interactivity, the reader is the main character on some occasions and the author on others. The experience of reception becomes more complete.

From the aesthetic of reception (Jauss, 1977; Iser, 1987), interactivity offers the opportunity to choose different possibilities for continuing the story, new narrative sequences and new paths of information. From the aesthetic of reception, interactivity offers the opportunity to choose different possibilities for continuing the story, new narrative sequences and new paths of information.

We have to redefine people’s competences. Therefore, the development of digital competence has to be included in people’s educational process. In «Dragon Age: Origins», high fantasy is alive and we have to find ways of combining printed and electronic copies in order to promote reading.


«Men and women from every race, warriors and magi, barbarians and kings... the Grey Wardens sacrificed everything to stem the tide of darkness...and prevailed» (Duncan, head of the Grey Wardens in Ferelden).

This is the essential message that underlies the story of «Dragon Age: Origins». As a videogame, this is a dark heroic fantasy set in an imaginary world, a deep, complex story filled with varied characters and plots. We cannot compare playing time and reading time but when the user finishes the game, he will have been playing for almost 70 hours. Half that time is dedicated to the arcade dimension and the remainder to reading and interaction. For this reason, it could be considered a fantasy novel.

The main character’s mission is to become a Grey Warden and to avoid the emergence of the Dark Spawn, but to do this he will need help from the different characters who themselves are involved in politics, wars or intrigues. Depending on the decisions...
and actions taken, the player’s entourage will be large
or small. During the game the user must learn how to
become a good leader since all the decisions and
actions taken will condition his fate. As in other high
fantasy stories, alliances or entourages are crucial to
defeating the Dark Spawn. They have their own
opinions and objectives, and may ask for The
Warden’s help on quests of their own. The main
caracter can recruit different companions that will be
active or not (because the Warden can only use three
at a time, but they can be replaced depending on the
situation). However, The Warden can make
decisions that will result in a companion leaving, or
even dying.

Leadership plays an important role in partner
interaction. It may change depending on plot decisions
or gifts. There are 10 full partners in «Dragon Age:
Origins», and seven in «Dragon Age: Origins» – Aw-
akening (the sequel). Some of the characters in «Dragon
Age: Origins» are Alistair, a new Grey Warden, Lelina-
na, a Chantry sister, Morrigan, a Witch of the Wilds,
Oghren, a dwarven Berserker, Sten, a qunari warrior,
Wynne: a senior enchanter from the Circle, Zevran:
an Antivan assassin and the dog: a mabari war hound.
In the sequel, we find the following characters: Anders:
an apostate mage; Justice: a trapped Fade Spirit;
Mhairi: a Ferelden warrior; Nathaniel: a Human rogue;
Oghren: a dwarven Berserker (the same character as in
«Dragon Age: Origins»), Sigrun: a dwarf rogue; Vel-
lanna: a Dalish magus.

This is a complex videogame that requires the user
to read constantly and which creates a parallel
universe with several story lines and endings. The
user/reader can interact with the characters from
«Dragon Age: the stolen» and «Dragon Age: the calling» (Gaid
er 2009a, 2009b). New formats such as comics allow
the text to be expanded. This is a good example of a
combination of tradition and modernity, because the
story of this videogame is based on an epic. Other
authors like Garin and Pérez (2009) have developed
work on videogames that are closer in form to science
fiction. The skills developed through «Dragon Age:
Origins» are multiple because the user needs to be
computer literate, use his reading experience and the
cognitive skills (memory or attention) relevant to it.
To all this we would also add the entertainment
dimension, which gives the user extra motivation.

7. Recurrent topics in «Dragon Age: Origins».
interextuality

Lukens (2003) reminds us that the high fantasy
genre is primarily characterized by its focus on the
conflict between good and evil, in this case the Grey
Wardens and the Dark Spawn, respectively. It is
similar to Tolkien’s (The Lord of the Rings) battle
between Sauro’s forces and the human, elf and
dwarf races. High fantasy portrays full, complete
human and classic characters such as the king without
a throne, like the one depicted in this story. Alistair
discovers that he is the heir of Ferelden but using the
interactive fiction, players/users have the opportunity
to put him back on the throne or not. This is a
recurrent topic in literature because we find many
instances in which the king must recover his throne
after it was taken from him.

In this genre, credibility depends on the fantasy
world that has been recreated. Ferelden is similar to
Middle Earth, an invented world which must be
reunified by the heroes. Themes throughout the role-
playing videogame encompass a broad concern for
Humanity, universalizing the human conflict of good
versus evil. For this reason, the politics, wars and
quests are orientated towards resolving this conflict.

Race is another recurrent element. Based on the
high fantasy classics, elves, dwarves and wizards play
their part in this story, each with specific skills, who,
depending on the decisions made by the user/reader,
may decisively influence the development of the story.
Naturally the user needs to read the codex included in
the game for a better understanding of the keys to this
fantasy world.

Creatures such as ogres, dragons or spiders appear
throughout the story. We have talked about politics or
the relationship between good and evil, and we find
betrayal as a feature of some of the characters. Some-
times the user/reader does not expect certain situations
to arise that relate to such questions. This reminds us
two parties are battle for territory and supremacy.

It is clear that classic texts, above all, The Lord of
the Rings, have influenced the design of this role-
playing videogame. But the story is different and the
characters are new and contextualized in a different
fantasy world. This, added to the attractive design of
the game (graphics and music), makes for a good
quality product.

8. Conclusions: a new way of reading?

After analysing the role-playing videogame
«Dragon Age: Origins», we need to answer the ques-
tions that posed in our text. We firmly believe
new formats are a reality in society and it is time for
educators to find new ways to promote reading. For
instance, the book and the videogame of the classic


