Stories in Diverse Media? Play, Story Telling, & Critical Media Literacy in the Googleburg Galaxy

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of language and storytelling as fundamental aspects of human experience. It emphasizes the importance of critical media literacy in today's tech-dominated world, where diverse stories and media are essential for democracy and freedom. The paper also highlights the impact of social media on storytelling and the need to challenge the dominance of profit-driven platforms. It underscores the power of storytelling through play and critical media literacy in shaping our understanding of the world and advocating for diverse perspectives.

Keywords

media, Googleburg Galaxy, story telling, critical media literacy, stories

Introduction

Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan is often remembered for his idiom that technology can be viewed as an extension of the self. For close to 300,000 years, language has served as a human technology. Through language, the ability to play and tell stories has served as an extension of the self into physical and digital environments (Handwerk, 2021). But language is more than an extension of self; it is also a core component of subjecthood. The choice of words (storytelling) we use to categorize, order, structure, and explain the chaos of human life offers different glimpses into our subjectivity based entirely on the language we select (the stories we tell). In contemporary research narratives, language often acts as a certain indicator of the issue under investigation (Lee et al., 2022; Moreno et al., 2021; Ogren & Sandhofer, 2021;

Park et al., 2022; Ríssola et al., 2022). It is also an intriguing scientific problem that draws significant attention from researchers across multiple disciplines (Cummins, 2021; Ferretti et al., 2017; Goodman & Frank, 2016; Kirby et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2022). The words that describe the spaces we occupy impact how we exist within those spaces, and of course, who benefits from such interpretations. We use language to craft the stories by which we embody the world we live in. Language organizes one's place within that world by describing who belongs and who benefits from access and privilege. In the Googleburg Galaxy of the 21st century, a world dominated by Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and more, subjecthood requires critical media literacy and an active engagement with media technologies to ensure diverse stories and diverse media (Gennaro & Miller, 2020). The goal of the article is to analyze stories across different platforms such as games, storytelling, and critical media literacy within the Googleburg galaxy.

Research Methods

Developing a methodology to investigate stories in diverse media, play, storytelling, and critical media literacy in the Googleburg galaxy is crucial for comprehending and analyzing information presentation in various formats, including the vast expanse of data accessible in this galaxy. Key facets of this methodology include: (a) recognizing the contextual backdrop when examining stories in different media, encompassing socio-cultural, historical, and political dimensions; (b) engaging in critical media literacy, entailing the evaluation of information sources, validation, and differentiation between fact and opinion/speculation; (c) adopting a multimedia approach that integrates text, graphics, video, audio, and more; (d) investigating games as a form of media, specifically video games, which play a vital role in narrative storytelling, delving into their plots, ethical dimensions, and their interaction with players; (e) comprehending how stories unfold in diverse media, including narrative techniques and expressive methods, aiding in the examination of these stories' impact on the audience; (f) the methodology should consider the intended audience and the potential influence on them, emphasizing the importance of understanding how stories shape individuals' thoughts and beliefs; and (g) incorporating ethical considerations into storytelling across various media forms. Broadly, the approach to researching stories in diverse media necessitates a deep comprehension of the media landscape and the skill to critically assess information, regardless of its presentation format. In a Googleburg world where information is abundant and diverse, this methodology is particularly vital for discerning factual accuracy from misinformation and sustaining a critical perspective towards all encountered information.

Exploring the methodology for researching stories in diverse media, games, storytelling, and critical media literacy is a significant and intriguing area of study, especially in today's world where media profoundly influence perceptions of the past and present. To initiate this exploration: (a) determining the historical topic, period, or phenomenon for research across different media, such as World War I, the Middle Ages, or the history of religious conflicts; (b) selecting the media formats under consideration, identifying options like movies, television, computer games, literature, comics, music, etc.; (c) developing an analytical framework or evaluation methodology to assess each media format, including the analysis of factual reliability, portrayal of historical events, and characterization of figures; (d) investigating the content of various media formats related to the selected topic, collecting data, creating analytical notes, and recording observations; (e) comparing how the story is presented in diverse media formats and from different perspectives, scrutinizing emphasized or distorted aspects in each medium; (f) exploring how media representations of history can impact public

perception and understanding of historical events, encompassing an examination of reactions from viewers, players, or readers to specific historical depictions and interpretations; and (g) examining how varied audiences perceive and respond to historical information in different media formats, probing into the levels of media literacy and critical thinking among viewers, players, or readers.

The research methodology should consistently evolve and adjust to shifts in media and society. Study methods of stories in diverse media and practicing critical media literacy aids in comprehending how media formats shape the perception and interpretation of history, fostering critical thinking among information consumers. The research on stories in diverse media and critical media literacy encompasses:

1. Conducting content analysis of media content to identify specific historical facts or aspects emphasized, ignored, or distorted in various media formats. Utilize quantitative methods to assess information distribution.
2. Employing category-specific content analysis to assess the information content of media formats within the context of the designated "category" or the associated level of accuracy. This aids in assessing the significance of alignment with historical facts across various mediums.
3. Monitoring audience responses to historical presentations in different media by analyzing comments, discussions, reviews, and critiques. This provides insights into how viewers, players, or readers perceive the information and how it shapes their perspectives.
4. Employing questionnaires and interviews with the audience to explore their perception of historical information in the media formats they consume. This helps uncover their knowledge, perspectives, and attitudes toward history.
5. Applying mediation theories to examine how media impact the perception and comprehension of history. For instance, investigate the influences and mediations that media exert on the development of historical narratives.

If Googleburg serves as a metaphor for the contemporary digital landscape, it becomes imperative to examine and analyze trends in the digital media galaxy. This entails scrutinizing how technological advancements impact the representation of stories and contribute to media literacy. These methodologies prove valuable for exploring historical narratives across diverse media formats and cultivating critical media literacy in the Googleburg galaxy or any other digital environment. It remains crucial to underscore that researching stories in media demands objectivity, thorough analysis, and a profound comprehension of its societal implications.

Results

Consider the term *homo sapiens*, universally agreed upon to best describe the species to which all current human life belongs. As Yuval Noah Harar explains in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, there was at one point in history many species of the genus homo; however, the only species that survives today is the homo sapien (Harari, 2014). The Latin translation for the term *sapien* is "wise man" indicating, as Harar argues, it was the intellect of sapiens that allowed for their adaptability, which included the creation of and use of tools. Using their intelligence, sapiens both adapted to their surrounding environments simultaneously as they altered those environments to human life. Such adaptability was paramount for sapiens survival and tantamount to its ultimate dominance over other homo species despite their comparative lack of size, strength, speed.

However, we are more than just knowledgeable beings. We are also storytelling beings –*narrans*. John D. Niles (1999), in his work *Homo Narrans: the Poetics and Anthropology of*

Oral Literature, argued it was the use of language as a tool, which made sapiens unique. For Niles, sapiens adapted and prospered in environments around the globe by using language to communicate their knowledge through stories, which created opportunities to adjust the self to the environment or the environment to the self. All animals communicate, but storytelling turns communication into animation, bringing language to life. Storytelling is a uniquely sapien trait that allows for the sharing of wisdom across generations beyond that which is already passed on in the genetic code of each animal.

Play is a complementary trait to intellect and storytelling for our species of homo, which has been advantageous to survival. In *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture* Johan Huizinga (1949/1998) discusses the crucial role that play occupied in the establishment of sapien civilizations and societies, suggesting it to be of equal importance to language and myth (storytelling). Play, as a system, takes language and shapes it to tell stories. Play, as a technique, engages sapiens in their concrete situations, challenging them to question their role in these situations and empowering them to engage as active meaning-makers in those to follow. Play, as a method, is creative and expressive. Play, as a methodology, offers contestation, rebellion, and subversion opportunities. Fundamentally, play is the process through which our subjective selves digest our objective realities by animating language, legitimating and/or destabilizing stories, and crystalizing objectification or activating subjectivity in every one of us.

Critical media literacy can be viewed as an approach that encourages play. As a social justice project, critical media literacy uses play to unpack representation, ideology, and economics issues in media and technology. According to Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share in *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education,* practicing critical media literacy involves a conceptual understanding of six intersecting themes: social constructivism, languages and semiotics, audience and positioning, politics of representation, production and institutions, and social and environmental justice (Kellner & Share, 2019). Hegemony, for example, works because of the presence of the press and its ability to shape human interaction by dominating the venues of storytelling and play (Gramsci, 1971). This is equally true for the culture industry (Adorno, 1991). In fact, one of the real dangers of capitalism has been the exploitation of the working class by a few elites and the acceptance of this marginalization by the working class as a "normal" component of everyday life (this is hegemony!). The danger of capitalism and a primary reason for its growth and success has been its ability to manufacture consent, a process by which ruling elites control the storytelling process; limiting the number of stories that get told, shaping the process of how they are shared, legitimating the criteria by whom they are spoken, and regulating the channels through which they get distributed (Herman & Chomsky, 1998). There is even a desire to manage how these stories get consumed! Capitalism, on the surface, appears to be an economic system. However, the underlying actions that grease the wheels are ideological and based not on what gets sold but on how stories get told and consumed.

Social Media. Storytelling and Pandemic Play

The Internet and social media have fundamentally transformed our world in recent decades, affecting many areas of human endeavor (Alarcón et al., 2018; Chester et al., 2020; Ding et al., 2017; Mudrick et al., 2016; Vaterlaus et al., 2015). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are altering the practices of human storytelling. For more than 6000 years, as the world changed around us, sapiens survived by adapting and telling stories. Storytelling provides comfort explaining the reasons behind societal changes and has helped sapiens adapt

to change by marking out the steps required to successfully adjust to the emerging world. More recently, in the case of COVID 19, where the changes were instant, global, and with dire consequences, the primary spaces for storytelling migrated to social media. With people in lockdown and self-isolation around the globe, play, work, socializing, shopping, fitness, art, culture, leisure, learning, and music were relocated to social media spaces. However, social media spaces are not free public spaces. Social media platforms are businesses owned, controlled, and monitored for profit. Therefore, their impact on the processes of language, storytelling, and play occurs within a framework that serves their economic interests. The impact of social media is now being researched by many different scholars and experts in various fields (Grover et al., 2022; see also Chen et al., 2022; Reisach, 2021; Turner, 2018).

Here, an area of particular interest is young people's storytelling on social media, as young people are the largest user group of social media (Third et al., 2017). In the spring of 2020, COVID 19 forced the migration of all aspects of young people's lives to the digital. Around the world, outdoor public spaces were closed, schools were shut down, sports teams and clubs were cancelled, and the opportunity to gather and congregate in public areas was discouraged and even made illegal in some parts. By April 2021, UNICEF reported that over 1.6 billion children in 190 countries had been displaced from public spaces by COVID 19, moving schools and activities to the digital where available (Miks & McIlwaine, 2021). Research on young people, social media, and human rights at York University in Toronto, Canada, in 2021 explored young people's play during COVID 19.[1] In a pandemic and post-pandemic world, access to play spaces remain a priority for democracy since play by its very definition is supposed to exist outside of ordinary life. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1949/1998) argued that humans play by entering the "magic circle": "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (p. 10).

Within the magic circle, individuals take on a set of expected roles, actions, and persona that are different from outside of the game. When asked about their experiences of play during the pandemic, young people frequently expressed the primary role occupied for social media for connecting with other people during COVID 19 lockdowns. For the young people who spoke about their pandemic play, COVID 19 had displaced the location where play happened, from liminal spaces or third spaces outside of adult control and direct supervision, onto social media platforms and often inside the primary area of the home (to access the technology required to visit social media platforms) with limited privacy. These findings from the pandemic play research are not the isolated experiences of youth. Therefore, when a small group of proprietors control the magic circle, the types of stories that get told, shared, liked, and crystalized into popular discourse are framed through the guiding principles of the proprietors who operate these spaces for profit. It is no coincidence that billionaire owners of Amazon, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Oracle (as examples) profited greatly from COVID 19 by owning the very platforms and commons where stories get told and where play happens.[2]

Discussion

In "The Culture Industry, Enlightenment as Mass Deception" Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer noted the sedative possibilities of entertainment (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2006).

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1 Under the supervision of Dr. Steve Gennaro, this research was conducted in collaboration with more than 50 York University Children, Childhood and Youth students and over 120 young people from the greater Toronto area who documented how they played during lockdown, isolation, and the global pandemic.

2 "The 400 richest Americans added $4.5tn to their wealth last year, a 40% rise, even as the pandemic shuttered large parts of the US, according to Forbes magazine's latest tally of the country's richest people" (Rushe, 2021). For more on the inequity of capital during COVID, see the January 2021 OXFAM report by E. Berkhout et al. (2021).

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the goal of the culture industry is to entertain the masses establishing agreement (or consensus) between the media, the medium, and the media viewer. As Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) argue, when people are entertained, they uncritically accept the media that sedates them, the ideological bias embedded in the structure of the medium, and the diversity (or lack thereof) in media stories. If storytelling shapes who we are and has the power to alter the reality we live in, then the subversive power of play should not be overlooked. For children, it has been primarily agreed-upon dating back to G. Stanley Hall and the beginning of adolescent psychology through to Jean Piaget and his staged theory of cognitive development, until the present moment, that "play" occupies a primary role in the mental, social, and even moral development of young people and their understanding of language, culture, and self (Hall, 1904; Piaget, 1985). Be it child's play or adult storytelling; play occupies a subversive position, whereby it creates a safe space to challenge, critique, and even destabilize social norms. Learning social roles, often called "identity formation," occurs through subversive play. Through play, children take the stories that explain the world and their role in it- and act them out. In acting out the stories of a culture, children choose to accept or deny these stories as truth.

Mary Flanagan (2009) argues in *Critical Play: Radical Play Design* that play can act as a space for subversion whereby an individual can use the play space to explore and speak back to social issues where there is dissonance between the game player and their lived experiences. When the stories told by the culture industry are consumed critically, the lack of diversity and the crisis of representation become immediately visible. As Flanagan notes "[p]lay is, by definition, a safety space. If a designer or artist can make safe spaces that allow the negotiation of real-world concepts, issues, and ideas, then a game can be successful in facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions for apparently intractable problems" (Flanagan, 2009). Despite being subjected to the prescribed stories generated by the algorithms of Google, Facebook, Instagram, Apple, Amazon and more; we can still be designers who reclaim the magic circle as a play space to tell stories. A true word can still be spoken back to power. Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* describes this power to name "the word" as a core component for liberation as it enables the subject to also name the world, thereby participating in transforming it (Freire & Ramos, 2000). It is therefore a requirement for democracy that all people have the freedom to tell their stories and the opportunity to access free spaces where these stories can be shared. Examples of critical media literacy, practiced as subversive play can take multiple forms, such as "unplaying, re-dressing or reskinning, and rewriting" (Flanagan, 2009). This is precisely what has happened on social media across 2020 and 2021 in response to the murder of George Floyd or the discovery of mass graves of unidentified Indigenous Children from Canadian Residential Schools.

Louis Althusser (1970) argued that ideology is most dangerous not when it is seen as an ideology but rather when it is dismissed as "normal" and a regular part of everyday life. Social media is the home of digital play. Social media platforms operate with in a framework of normalcy - privileging some while actively denying others. Ruha Bejamin's *Race After Technology* and Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* provide clear examples of how the normalcy of technology create false notions of diversity, equity, and representation (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). If we begin from the premise that language is a technology and an extension of the self, then story telling is the very way that we become in the world, which surrounds us. And play is the process by which we consume and tell stories. Therefore, critical media literacy can help illuminate the importance of play and play spaces to diverse stories and diverse media in the Googleburg Galaxy, which are essential to freedom and democracy.

Conclusion

Exploring stories in diverse media, including games, storytelling, and critical media literacy within the context of Googleburg, involves:

1. It is beneficial to adopt a multimedia approach that incorporates text, audio, video, graphics, and interactive elements when delving into stories across different media.
2. Applying critical analysis to assess how history is presented in different media is crucial. This includes identifying and examining stereotypes, biases, or distortions that may be present.
3. Considering the cultural context and influences on historical representations in different media is essential for a comprehensive understanding of how stories are shaped and communicated.

Games are examined in the context of: (a) interactive history: analyzing the use of games to tell stories through interactive plots and player choices; (b) historical accuracy: Investigating the degree of historical accuracy in games, including the accuracy of events, characters, and atmosphere; (c) impact on perception: exploring how games can influence perception and understanding of history, especially in younger generations; (d) storytelling, narrative strategies: exploring different narrative strategies in storytelling and their impact on historical understanding; (e) narrative in digital formats: examining the effectiveness of digital formats (video, audio, digital books) for conveying historical narratives; (f) the emotional dimension: analyzing how emotional context in stories can affect the perception of history; (g) critical media literacy in Googleburg, evaluating information: developing critical media literacy skills to evaluate the credibility of historical information in online environments; (h) use of technology: exploring how technology, such as search engines and social media, influences the formation of historical consciousness; (i) digital literacy: developing digital literacy to effectively engage with different media at Googleburg; (j) a critical look at algorithms: understanding how search and recommendation algorithms can shape distorted representations of history and how to counter this; and (k) combining these aspects will help create an integrated approach to exploring story in different media, including games, storytelling, and the development of critical media literacy in the context of Googleburg.

In conclusion, the following methods prove highly effective for research of stories in diverse media (gaming, traditional storytelling, and critical media literacy) within the context of Googleburg and conducting comprehensive content analysis:

1. Ethnographic Approach: Applying ethnographic methods to study people's interaction with historical content in different media.
2. Sociological Research: Utilizing surveys and focus groups to identify preferences, perceptions, and the impact of games, stories, and media on collective and individual historical consciousness.
3. Experimentation: Developing research projects, including creating interactive projects such as games or digital storytelling, to test the impact of different media on perceptions of history.
4. Developing Educational Programs: Using media materials to evaluate the effectiveness of interactive learning and the formation of historical understanding.
5. Theoretical Framework.
6. Semiotic Analysis: Applying a semiotic approach to investigate symbols, signs, and story structures in different media.
7. Reception Theory: Using reception theory to explore how audiences perceive and interact with historical content.
8. Research Ethics: Paying attention to cultural context and being ethical, respecting cultural sensitivities when researching history in different media.

9. Transparency of the Research Process: Ensuring transparency in data collection and processing, as well as openness of criteria for evaluating the results.
10. Collective Reflection: Conducting a collective reflection involving researchers, audiences, and community members to better understand the effects of the research.
11. Comparative Analysis: Performing a comparative analysis of the impact of historical media in different cultures and comparing their perception and impact.
12. Format Comparison: Exploring differences in the perception of stories through different media such as books, movies, games, and digital storytelling.

This methodology offers a broad spectrum of approaches to examine stories in diverse media within the context of Googleburg. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods, practical experiments, and theoretical frameworks facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how media shapes historical consciousness.

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