

Digital Arts for Young Audiences? Mediation and Dissemination of Digital Arts and Culture to Norwegian School Children

Ragnhild Tronstad, Gustav Jørgen Pedersen, Stahl Stenslie

Affiliation: Arts for Young Audiences Norway (Kulturtanken), OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University

Location, Country: Oslo, Norway

Contact Emails: rtr@kulturtanken.no, gjp@kulturtanken.no, stahl@kulturtanken.no

Abstract

Through mobile and networked technologies such as the smartphone, digital technologies, environments and experiences are to an increasing extent impacting the production and presentation of everyday aesthetics. Yet, most art productions offered to young audiences are still based on methodologies and expressions that predate the digital shift. *Arts for Young Audiences Norway* is the Norwegian Ministry of Culture's agency responsible for bringing and presenting a wide variety of professional art and culture to all school pupils in Norway. In this paper, we address the important question of our children's digital rights, outlining future and needed policies for bringing digital arts and culture to children and young people, asking: How do we produce and present digital arts for young audiences?

Keywords

Digital arts for school children, young audiences, digital rights, mobile and networked technologies, dissemination of digital art

Introduction

It has become a truism that children growing up today, in an age of increasingly rapid technological shifts, face a world of social interaction and communication which is decisively different from those growing up just a decade earlier. An example of this change is the fact that 9 out of 10 Norwegian children aged 9-16 now own a smartphone [1] – a technological device that reached worldwide success only 10 years ago. Notably, in addition to calling and texting, children use their smartphones to listen to music; to make, edit and share images and films; to play games and search for information on the internet. In this way, the smartphone has become an integral part of the everyday life of most kids in Norway. It is a raster unto the world; one among several ways in which children interact with their environments and social networks; in which they form and negotiate their public identities and self-perceptions; in which they sense and create, move and play.

Using this smartphone example as point of departure, the questions addressed in this paper engage with how recent digital technologies and cultures impact on the way in which we think about *art* for young audiences. This is among the prioritized areas for the Norwegian national

agency *Kulturtanken – Arts for Young Audiences Norway*. [2] When the everyday life of children and young people appears to be saturated with new ways of experiencing artistic works (such as music, images, literature or film), as well as new ways of engaging in artistic and aesthetic creation themselves, how should the arguably more traditional, pre-digital and “analogue” field of arts for young audiences respond?

Indeed, what are the prospects and challenges of using recent digital technologies in the production, distribution and reception of arts for young audiences? How can new digital technologies facilitate new modes of sensation, perception and cognition? What kind of obstacles related to physiological, psychological, technical, or ideological issues do we need to be attentive to when dealing with digital arts and culture for children and young people? What about the institutional frameworks governing the education of teachers and artists? [3] How should issues pertaining to ethics, digital privacy, big data and corporate interests be balanced against innovation, creativity and the need to be in tune with contemporary developments when the target audience is school pupils? These are some of the important questions to be addressed in our time when the Millennials – those born after the 1980s onwards and raised with digital technologies as a natural part of daily life – start to influence how art is conceived and consumed. [4]

The Cultural Schoolbag

Kulturtanken – Arts for Young Audiences Norway is the Norwegian Ministry of Culture's agency responsible for making professional art and culture available to all school pupils in Norway. Most prominently, this includes nationwide responsibility for *The Cultural Schoolbag* (TCS), which is the centrepiece of the government's policy for bringing culture to children and young people. [5] Briefly put, *The Cultural Schoolbag* secures that all children growing up in Norway have access to professional art – spanning literature, music, visual arts, performing arts, film and cultural heritage. This is done through close collaboration between *Arts for Young Audiences Norway*, county councils and municipalities, schools and cultural institutions. The program is ambitious and far reaching. Four times a

year in average, 3300 schools, including 870 000 school pupils in the country are visited by professional musicians, writers, theatre companies, dancers, artists and other cultural producers through *The Cultural Schoolbag*. The explicit political aim is to provide all children living in Norway with a shared frame of reference and joint experiences, irrespective of their nationality, address, wealth and social background. It is held that artistic and cultural expression can transcend norms, languages and social identities, and in this way, be a force for democracy that ideally can be felt far beyond our national borders, reaching out into the world.

While *Arts for Young Audiences* is an agency of the Ministry of Culture, it also works very closely with the Ministry of Education and Research, which is responsible for the institutions where TCS is implemented, namely the schools. In addition to being responsible for TCS, *Arts for Young Audiences* will provide advice and other services to the central government authorities involved in the culture and education sectors, thus helping to establish a political framework and working to improve national initiatives.

Bringing arts and culture into the framework of schools and primary education is a growing field in Scandinavia and the Baltic region. Related organizations in an international context are for example the Irish *Arts in Education* [6], the American *Young Audiences Arts for Learning* [7], and various other national programmes. The common challenge for them all is how to grapple with the emerging digital habits of children, understanding how these habits influence and transform how children and youth perceive, approach and interact with contemporary artistic and cultural forms.

Digital Arts in *The Cultural Schoolbag*

As UNICEF puts it, “digital technology is an irreversible fact of our lives”. [8] The receptivity with which new media genres, platforms and formats are taken up by young people, effortlessly appropriated, applied and integrated into their lives and minds is impressive. In this situation, not to acknowledge the obvious impact of digital media on contemporary culture would be foolish, even irresponsible. Thus, *Arts for Young Audiences* is currently discussing how digital arts and culture could be included and added to the other six cultural fields covered by *The Cultural Schoolbag*. However, before we can start drafting such a scenario, there are a number of conceptual challenges to be discussed. First of all, as digital media have become an integral part of the production, distribution and reception of works within all the other genres, what would our rationale be to add “digital arts and culture” as a separate category? Perhaps “the digital” should rather be included as a dimension to be addressed within each of the other, already existing genres?

In the event that we add digital arts and culture as a separate category to the other six, it would encompass a wide range of genres, from robotics; software art; interactive literature; social media art; video games and game art; virtual, augmented and mixed reality works; computer

generated music and sound art; to the educational use of digital technology, such as augmented reality (AR), in mediating cultural heritage. However, if we instead choose



Figure 1. School children wearing the HoloLens system while interacting with Minecraft models.

to include the digital as a dimension within each of the six genres that are already covered in *The Cultural Schoolbag*, we must be careful not to reduce its role to be a mere mediational tool in the nationwide distribution and mediation of essentially non-digital works of art. While potentially being able to reach a wider audience, this solution runs the risk of reducing the artistic quality of the mediated work, resulting in an audience experience of a comparatively low aesthetic quality. This would be counter-productive to *Arts for Young Audiences*' primary mandate which is to enhance the artistic and mediational quality of *The Cultural Schoolbag*. To this end, digital media should be employed as a mediating tool only to the extent that the dimensions it adds to the artwork function to enrich or enhance, rather than reduce, the aesthetic experience of the work. This is a rather ambitious goal, but a necessary way to proceed if we are to explore the full potential of digital media in the mediation of art to young audiences.

One example of such an approach is the collaboration with the cultural heritage project *Borgarsyssel*. [9] Here, schoolchildren use *Minecraft* as a tool in building and re-imagining the old Viking settlement in the Norwegian city Sarpsborg. To add to the project's disseminative quality we developed a tool to export the *Minecraft* models into the *Microsoft HoloLens* display system. (Figure 1) Seeing the *Borgarsyssel* models in augmented reality extended the perceptual cues and qualities of the project by adding an immersive dimension. In our digital lab setting, this positively influenced the schoolchildren's involvement and increased their level of engagement.

A related, but different, aspect to explore in this respect is the mediation of artistic methods – of artistic practice – for example, musical composition. *Arts for Young Audiences*' predecessor *The National Touring Concerts* launched in 2015 an educational video game called *Lyderia*

[10] (translating to “*Soundia*”), in which pupils learn to compose small pieces of music as part of a challenging, yet encouraging, structure of puzzle solving. The game is available for free, and has so far been played by more than 30 000 pupils and teachers.

Finally, digital arts and culture must be present in *The Cultural Schoolbag* as aesthetic and cultural artefacts in their own right. *Arts for Young Audiences*’ mandate states that the *The Cultural Schoolbag* shall interact with the schools’ educational plans, meaning that it should maintain a supportive, but never subordinate, role. Experiencing art works that ponder and play with technology, providing insight into fields such as, for example, robotics, artificial intelligence, neuroscience or biology might instigate reflection, wonder and fascination in a young audience vis á vis our technological presence and future. This exemplifies how the aesthetic experience of art works may in itself inspire the children to engage in further learning, without the artists being expected to compromise their artistic autonomy in the process.

Outlook: Digital Art Futures and Framing the Digital Rights of Children

Through mobile and networked technologies such as the smartphone, digital technologies, environments and experiences are impacting both the production and presentation of everyday aesthetics. Yet, in a Scandinavian context, most art productions offered young audiences are based on methodologies and expressions that predate the digital shift. The fact that they seldom relate to the digital lives of children are possible reasons why feedback from children in schools often report artistic experiences to be irrelevant or simply ‘boring’. [11] Another obstacle when it comes to the potential impact of digital technologies within a compulsory educational system is that few art teachers have experience with the creation of digital forms of art. [3]

The virtual space of online, social media is indeed a representational space, but, put in the formula of Lefebvre, also a lived and a real space. [12] Thus, the young audiences and the Millennials perceive their digital everyday life as *real*. Where others see the flickering of the screen, young audiences perceive it as an experiential reality. As Latour puts it, the more digital, the less virtual (as unreal), and the more material a given activity becomes. [13] [14].

Currently one out of three Internet users are children. [8] One could argue that in a world where digital technologies are becoming a natural everyday component and basic need, opening up to digital arts and the possibilities of interactive and co-creative experiences is becoming a question of children’s rights. “The Convention on the Rights of the Child,” Article 29, states that ‘*The education of the child shall be directed to ... (a) The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential...*’. [15] Further, Article 31 states ‘*State parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure*

activity.’ These are powerful statements written in pre-digital times. Now, in a world marked by digital tools and an everyday online presence in Social Media (SoMe), children’s access to experiences such as digital arts ought to be recognized as a most natural and self-evident element. So far, however, it is not. Thus, in a world experiencing a tsunami of cultural changes [16], initiatives and international forums such as ISEA are needed to frame and further the fundamental debate about how to make and disseminate digital arts for young audiences.

References

- [1] Norwegian Media Authority. (2016). *Barn og medier 2016 (Children and Media 2016)*. <http://www.barnogmedier2016.no/mediehverdagen> p. 18. Downloaded 21.1.2018
- [2] <http://www.kulturtanken.org>
- [3] Filimowicz, M. & Tzankova, V.. (2017). *Teaching Computational Creativity*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Pedró, Francisc. (2006). *THE NEW MILLENNIUM LEARNERS: Challenging our Views on ICT and Learning*. OECD-CERI. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/38358359.pdf> Downloaded 31.1.2018
- [5] <https://www.artsforyoungaudiences.no/>
- [6] <http://artsineducation.ie/>
- [7] Young Audiences Arts for Learning, www.youngaudiences.org
- [8] UNICEF. (2017). *The State of the World’s Children 2017: Children in a Digital World*. https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_101992.html Downloaded 21.1.2018
- [9] <https://ostfoldmuseene.no/stikkord/minecraft/>
- [10] <https://www.lyderia.no/>
- [11] Breivik, J.-K. & Christophersen, C. (eds.) (2013). *Den kulturelle skolesekken (The Cultural Schoolbag)*. Arts Council Norway.
- [12] Lefebvre, Henri. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Blackwell.
- [13] Latour, Bruno. (2011). *Networks, Societies, Spheres: Reflections of an Actor-Network*. International Journal of Communication 5 (2011), p. 796–810.
- [14] Bautista, S. S. (2013). *Museums in the Digital Age: Changing Meanings of Place, Community, and Culture*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- [15] UNESCO. (2006). *Road Map for Arts Education. The World Conference on Arts Education: Building Creative Capacities for the 21st Century*. http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/multimedia/HQ/CLT/CLT/pdf/Arts_Edu_RoadMap_en.pdf Downloaded 21.1.2018
- [16] Anne Bamford. (2017). *The Role of Arts in a Changing Educational Landscape*. <http://artsineducation.ie/wp-content/uploads/Anne-Bamford-Essay-1.pdf> Downloaded 21.1.2018

Authors Biographies

Ragnhild Tronstad, PhD: Senior researcher in the Research and Development department at Arts for Young Audiences, and professor II in the Department of Art, Design and Drama at OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University. Her publications span a diverse range of topics, from theatricality and performativity, play and gaming, interactive and robotic art, to design and cultural sustainability. Recent works focus on the aesthetic aspects of play and gaming, on the persuasiveness of play, and on mediations of presence in performative and interactive arts.

Gustav Jørgen Pedersen, PhD: Senior researcher in the Research and Development department at Arts for Young Audiences. Art historian and philosopher from the University of Oslo with a PhD thesis exploring intersections between art history and philosophy, with emphasis on Edvard Munch and Martin Heidegger. His research interests include aesthetics; philosophical and historical issues relating to modernism, death and transhumanism; contemporary drawing and paper based art.

Stahl Stenslie, PhD: head of the Research and Development department at Arts for Young Audiences. Artist, curator and researcher specializing in experimental art, embodied experiences and disruptive technologies. He co-founded The Journal of Som-aesthetics <https://journals.aau.dk/index.php/JOS> and is the editor in chief of EE – Experimental Emerging Art magazine www.eejournal.no
For more on his work with Touch and Technologies: <https://virtualtouch.wordpress.com>