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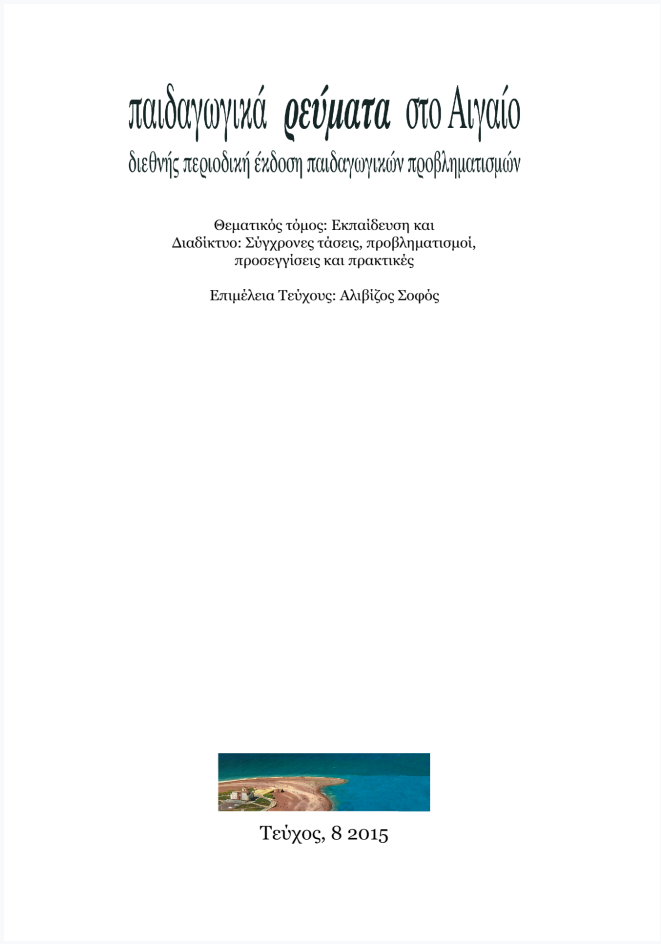

Apps for Kids – A Question of Quality

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Apps for Kids – A Question of Quality

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Abstract
Today, children in families have good access to mobile devices with touchscreens. In this context, numerous apps for learning, playing, reading or being creative can be used. However, the question of what is a *good* app cannot be answered easily. Since there was no list of criteria for the assessment of apps, yet, the *Media Literacy Lab* decided to engage with this topic in an open online course. During this course, both a first set of criteria as well as a website with reviews of more than 100 apps for children were built.

1. Introduction

Smartphones and Tablets already play a great role in everyday lives of families. This becomes evident by having a greater look at the current data of children's media equipment: 98% of parents with children aged three to eleven have mobile phones or smartphones. Another 31% of six to eleven year old children even have a smartphone or cell phone of their own (cf. MPFS 2011, p. 57).

The easy access to mobile devices and applications is also reflected in the importance children attribute to such devices: A survey shows that both the tablet (56 percent) as well as the smartphone (44 percent) - in addition to television – are considered by mothers to be the most attractive media for their children (cf. Guth 2012, p. 4). If children are allowed to use their parents' tablet or smartphone, they mostly use it for playing games (cf. KidsVerbraucherAnalyse 2013, p. 37 u. 70). Since kids are thereby also getting in contact with applications for reading, playing and learning, the question of these applications' quality becomes more important. By searching information about criteria for good children's apps, it becomes clear, that there is no data or evaluation for this kind of information, yet. Furthermore, there is no list of criteria available, which could help to assess the quality of an application.

2. Approach to the Development of Criteria and Test Questions

In order to obtain adequate evaluation criteria to test the quality of children's apps, the team of the Media Literacy Lab (www.medialiteracylab.de) decided to run a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). With the support of all the participants, they hoped to obtain various perspectives and expertise to build this foundation. The draft of the EU Network of Positive Online Content and Services for Children in Europe (POSCON; positivecontent.eu) was taken as a starting point for this exercise. This draft has been supplemented by a collection of other criteria by the team of Media Literacy Lab as well as the community of the online course. There were a total of twelve criteria, which will be outlined in the following paragraphs. 250 people participated in the course, including students of media pedagogy, media educators from practice and research, as well as teachers and parents. At the beginning of the course, the participants formed teams and chose one of the twelve criteria for processing. The overall results were evaluated and commented on by one or two coaches from the relevant field, such as data privacy, or media education. The outcome of the online seminar was a catalog, which consists of a definition of each of the twelve criteria, as well as a series of test questions,

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which can help to evaluate and review the quality of apps for kids from an educational perspective.

3. Criteria for Good Apps for Kids[2]

Two key evaluation criteria are the *Target Group* and the app's *Usability*. The suitability of an application should be checked with regards to the age level and the level of development of the declared target group. Therefore, the individual development and a child's needs should be considered. An indication of this could be the answer to the question whether children can use the app without any adult assistance, and whether the amount of information and the length of the playing time are reasonable for the target group. Another important point is the usability for the appropriate target group. To what extent can the application be used by children of different ages? Are there any obstacles in the navigation through the app or by generally dealing with it? In this context, the test questions aim to get an introduction to the app, which is suitable for the target group, like an intuitive layout (e.g. size and symbolism of buttons) or a child-friendly presentation of the audio-visual elements.

When assessing a children's app, the criterion of *Social Media Elements* should also be taken into account, if these can be found in the application. These are the elements that are integrated into the app and allow its users to communicate with other users via the Internet in various ways. Besides the possibility of benefiting from experience and knowledge exchange with other users, these integrations might also bring some hidden risks for children. Thus, it should be checked whether content and posts are getting reviewed by trained moderators before publication. It should also be ensured that there are uncomplicated ways for reporting developmental affecting content, e.g. an "alarm button", which kids can activate to get help.

Another important criterion for assessing a children's app is the *Attractiveness* of an application. This includes both design and content elements. Characteristics for very attractive apps can be, for example, innovative elements or a high degree of interactivity and individuality, which can particularly affect the motivation of the child during app usage.

The quality of an app especially reveals itself if it is transparent for children, parents or educators. The importance of this transparency increases by having a closer look on the currently discussed issues of *Security* and *Data Privacy*. These are the key evaluation criteria when it comes to assessing the quality of an application for kids. The transmission of sensitive user data, commercial elements or hidden advertising is already for adults difficult to understand. However, this problem intensifies in the context of digital offers, such as applications, that are aimed at the youngest audience. Children often engage independently with apps over a longer period of time. During the installation process as well as during the subsequent use, they have to face numerous hidden hazards. At this point it is important to support the kids and help them to detect those hazards. The test questions regarding security and data privacy focus on the appearance of commercial elements in an app, and whether these are compatible with the guidelines of the Youth Media Protection Act. In addition, the app has to be examined with regards to potential racist or pornographic content. Generally, a sensitive handling of user data, transparent data usage regulations and a high degree of controllability are signs for an app's trustworthy use of the privacy data of their young users.

If the conditions for a secure app usage have been checked, the next step can focus on the contents of an app. Because of the enormous range of learning-conducive apps, it is worth having a closer look at the quality of content based on the criteria *Learning and Education*. Test questions about a concrete task, the educational mandate, possibilities of using the app in the classroom or the suitability for users with special needs can give a useful guidance.

[2] The catalog can be downloaded on *gute-apps-fuer-kinder.de*.

In addition to the review of an app on the quality of their learning-conducive elements, the content can also be specifically analyzed for possible *Gender* themes. In this regard, the focus should be put on gender-neutral or stereotypical gender representations. Therefore, it is necessary to consider which conception of gender and role models is regarded as critical or suitable for kids. It is also essential to check the representation of female and male characteristics within an application, since children can be strongly influenced concerning their idea of gender roles. Trends can be seen in both visual (e.g. the color) and audio design, as well as in the task or by causing a more aggressive or a more emotional game behavior.

4. Example: Minecraft – Pocket Edition – a Borderline Case?

Apps cannot always be classified as being *good* or *bad* on the basis of the criteria catalog. In the end, depending on the individual weighting of the criteria, parents have to make their own decision, whether an app is *good* for their child or not. This can also be seen in the example of the app "Minecraft – Pocket Edition", which is a trimmed-down version of the eponymic indie open-world computer game. In this app, the users have the opportunity to build their own worlds with cube-shaped blocks. The graphic is kept very minimalistic: all blocks are the same size, only the color is different. On a pedagogical level, the app can only be assessed as mediocre: for children, it is not very difficult to understand the application's functions and controls, but there is no tutorial, which could facilitate the users to get started. If you want to go deeper into the game, or if you want to get an overview, you need prior knowledge or have to obtain this information from other sources like internet forums, for example. The menu is rather confusing and only available in English, which makes it harder to understand for non-English speaking young children. There is also the risk, that children "get lost" when clicking through the game and, for example, click the networking button, whereupon they are prompted to enter their privacy data. Despite these shortcomings from the pedagogical and didactic point of view, it is striking that Minecraft fascinates kids of different ages. The app tells neither a story nor does it have a learning or playing target. Nevertheless, children entertain themselves with it for hours and they can let their creativity run wild. This shows that it is not always a fancy design and a compelling story that make a game attractive for young users. To the contrary, a simple handling and the ability to interact creatively with the app is much more important. The application allows kids to create their own worlds, to build houses and also to destroy them again – much like playing with building blocks or Lego. When assessing an application as being *good* for children, not every criterion has to be checked with a positive result. Often, the fun a child has while playing, can be seen as another criterion and it is at the discretion of legal guardians, whether an app is appropriate for a child or not.

5. Conclusion

Today, in many families tablets or smartphones are always available. In the introduction it was already made clear that children have easy access to devices, on which they can use apps. Furthermore, many parents worry about their children's media use - for example regarding to the use of games or the internet (cf. Hasebrink/Schröder/Schumacher 2012, p. 20). The catalog described above offers assistance to educators and parents by giving criteria for the evaluation and reflection of an application. In addition, the initially described online course also developed the website *gute-apps-fuer-kinder.de*. There one can find app reviews that were created by the participants and students based on the list of criteria. Also, both the advantages and the disadvantages the respective author sees regarding to a particular app can be researched. Thus, a first point of contact for educators and parents was created, where they can find assistance with uncertainties about whether a particular app is suitable for the child, which app could be offered to the child or the question of what can ever be a *good* app for kids.

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