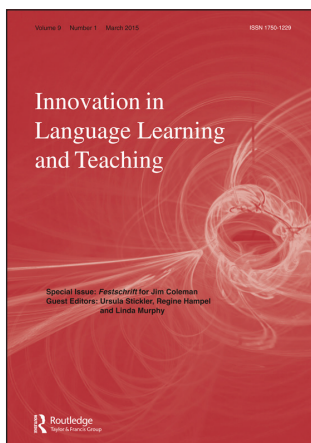


Book Review



Gameful Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice

Jonathon Reinhardt

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*Reviewed by
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In this book, Reinhardt provides a survey of the entire field of gameful second or foreign language teaching and learning (gameful L2TL). He does this by addressing three main areas: the theoretical underpinnings of gameful L2TL, the main approaches taken in gameful L2TL, and a discussion of the future research in gameful L2TL.

After briefly introducing the book in Chapter 1, Reinhardt begins Chapter 2 by discussing the popularity of digital games as entertainment, and addresses some of the main concerns of some educators, such as their potential to lead to violence or distort perceptions of cultures. He then presents an analysis of a small research project in which he identified the general advice found on the Internet for those who want to use digital games “in the wild” to help themselves learn a second or foreign language (L2). As he explains,

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the results from this analysis in the wild are an excellent starting point for those seeking to use games in a formal classroom setting.

In Chapter 3, Reinhardt delves into theories of what play is, why it is important, and how it can vary from person to person and from one context to another. A key take-away from this chapter is his discussion of the various ways theoreticians have tried to explain the different ways people play the same games. This discussion makes it clear that different people will play the same game in different ways and for varying reasons. This, in turn, leads to a conclusion that is repeated throughout the book: the games used to help teach languages need to be as accommodating as possible to a wide range of potential “learner-players”.

Chapter 4 continues to establish the theoretical foundations of the book by presenting a discussion of what a game is. This is a difficult task since there is no commonly accepted definition of this, but Reinhardt addresses all the commonly mentioned key aspects of games. He then moves on to discuss several digital game genres, such as role-playing games and simulation games, as well as some of the key design elements of games across genres, such as puzzle solving and levels. This latter discussion is particularly valuable for those interested in creating their own educational games as it helps bring to light the fact that there is a myriad of possible ways to craft a game, even within a specific genre.

Reinhardt concludes the theoretical foundations in Chapter 5, where he discusses various theories in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and how they can be supported by gameful L2TL. The theories addressed range from grammar-translation (GT) to identity play, and Reinhardt does an excellent job of showing how each different SLA theory can be uniquely accommodated by digital games. As such, this chapter is an invaluable resource for those who have a particular SLA theory they would like to apply to gameful L2TL. Reinhardt also makes a concerted effort to avoid bias in favor or against any particular SLA theory. Though he does indicate that GT, in particular, should probably not be used by itself if greater than basic proficiency is desired.

Having finished the theoretical foundations, in Chapter 6 Reinhardt discusses the first main subfield of gameful L2TL, which is the use of non-educational digital games to help learn an L2. Reinhardt calls this approach game-enhanced L2TL. An important part of this chapter is the discussion of how to choose an appropriate game. This discussion is a great aid for those wishing to pursue game-enhanced L2TL. However, it may be a bit overwhelming when he mentions the idea of being guided by learner-player preferences, since many educators will be looking to use games with a group of students who may have a wide variety of preferences, including, as Reinhardt acknowledges, the preference to not play games. But the main point of this chapter is the heavily emphasized use of pedagogical mediations, in particular

wraparounds. The idea here is that the best way to use a non-educational game is to supplement it with pre-, during, and post-game pedagogical activities. Reinhardt makes very sound theoretical arguments for the use of such mediations. However, something that is not addressed is how the implementation of these mediations might potentially change the nature of play in this context, and, therefore, potentially nullify some of the benefits of gameful L2TL.

The second area of gameful L2TL is presented in Chapter 7 and is related to the use of game design principles for activities other than games. Reinhardt calls this approach game-informed L2TL and emphasizes that in this approach the game design elements need not be overtly recognized as such. He distinguishes this approach from what he identifies as its subfield of gamification, in which the application of game design elements is always overtly noticeable to learners. This chapter is a treasure trove of ideas and principles on how to use different game design elements in order to improve language classes. Though digital games are not necessarily a part of game-informed L2TL, Reinhardt does point out ways in which technology can be used quite effectively by those wanting to implement this approach, for example through the use of digital badges and leaderboards.

The final subfield of gameful L2TL presented in this book is that of game-based L2TL. In this approach, educational games are used which have been specifically designed as tools to help language learners in their pursuit of acquiring an L2. Reinhardt addresses the challenges of building educational games, in particular funding, some of the SLA principles that should be kept in mind while designing these games, and some of the steps of developing an educational game. Much of this information is invaluable, especially to those who have not already tried to build an educational game. For example, he makes the readers aware of the need for iterative development so that they can be prepared for that need and plan for it in their schedule and budget, rather than being surprised by it when time and money are running out. One unfortunate omission of this chapter is the lack of any detailed descriptions of concrete examples of good educational games, real or imagined. Several educational games are mentioned, as are several potential applications of game design elements, but they are not described with sufficient detail for the reader to visualize the games. Moreover, several of the examples that are mentioned are specifically identified as being based on a GT approach, and are accompanied by the caveat that they would probably not lead to significant language acquisition. Nevertheless, this chapter provides many good pointers on things to keep in mind when designing an educational game and is an excellent resource for those interested in pursuing such a course.

The title of Chapter 9, “Researching Gameful L2TL,” is a little misleading. This chapter is predominantly a lesson on how to conduct research in general,

with gameful L2TL used as an example. The chapter starts by discussing the basic nuts and bolts of research, such as the difference between dependent and independent variables, and concludes with an in-depth presentation of a research project performed by Reinhardt and one of his students. One thing this chapter does very well is present the main research questions in the field of gameful L2TL, along with a discussion of the main ways in which research in this field is usually carried out.

In conclusion, Reinhardt's book is an excellent resource for anyone interested in the theory behind gameful L2TL or in learning how to begin implementing or researching gameful L2TL. The questions at the beginning of each chapter and the end of each section, along with the project ideas at the end of each chapter, make this book particularly well suited for use as a textbook in a class oriented around gameful L2TL. Moreover, Reinhardt's extensive citations and up-to-date bibliography provide those with specific interest in any one particular area addressed in the book the help they need to delve further into their topic of choice.

About the Reviewer

Arthur Wendorf is an Associate Professor of Spanish and the Spanish Education Program Coordinator at Northeastern State University. His research focuses on the use of educational technologies, particularly educational games, in the language classroom, and the use of corpora to inform the creation of these technologies.