



Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development and Implementation

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As the title of this edited volume suggests, the stated purpose of *Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development and Implementation* is to provide a critical overview of the why (theories) and how (development and implementation) of digital games in formal language learning classes. The key word here is “critical,” as several of the chapters in this volume diverge from the predominant trend of hype in the field, and instead make important observations about weaknesses in the field. The editors approached their task by breaking this volume down into three parts, not counting the introduction. The first part, comprising the first four chapters after the introduction, addresses the theoretical underpinnings of gameful language learning and identifies some of the weaknesses in how these theories have been discussed and implemented. The second part, comprising

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the next five chapters, consists of chapters that present new studies in the field and their findings. The last part, consisting of the last two chapters, makes an impassioned plea for researchers to refocus their efforts on empirical research within the context of the classroom, rather than continuing to provide theoretical justifications for the use of digital games. Thus, as a whole, this volume is geared primarily toward an audience of researchers in the field.

After briefly introducing both the book and the field in Chapter 1, the volume moves on to the first main part of the book, which is focused on the theoretical underpinnings of the field. Chapter 2 starts off this section by discussing the recent upsurge in interest in the use of digital games and gamification in language classes. Several important points are made in this chapter, which are repeated throughout the volume, including a discussion of the main theoretical arguments in favor of the use of games and the need to pay attention to specific game elements when discussing games, rather than only talking about a game's genre. Unfortunately, apparent issues with the labeling of some of the sections in this chapter, as well as odd placement of some of the figures and of the appendix, make the chapter somewhat difficult to follow. Nevertheless, this chapter does a good job of providing a fairly comprehensive survey of the field, and it provides an extensive bibliography for researchers to use.

In the literature, there has been a lot of interest recently in the use of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) for language learning. It is fitting, therefore, that Chapters 3 and 4 focus specifically on this genre. Chapter 3 starts the discussion by looking at the theoretical arguments in favor of using MMOGs, and by discussing some of the design possibilities available in traditional MMOGs, such as *World of Warcraft*, and more modern MMOGs, such as *Fortnite*. This chapter is especially focused on the fact that future empirical research needs to be grounded in sound theory, and it discusses how socio-cultural theory and other theories can be used to this end. The discussion of MMOGs in Chapter 4 returns to the issue of treating games as artifacts composed of different design elements, rather than as members of specific genres. This chapter does an excellent job of discussing some of the key design choices found in different MMOGs, and how these design elements can be used to help with different aspects of language acquisition. Moreover, this chapter provides an important discussion of how to best go about incorporating vernacular MMOGs into the classroom by providing pedagogical mediations. As such, Chapter 4 is one of the chapters that could potentially be of use to educators, in addition to being of great service to researchers.

The first part of the volume concludes with Chapter 5, with a discussion of the theoretical framework of human linguistics (HL) as a way of looking at the use of simulations in the language classroom. This chapter begins by

discussing several perceived issues with the current theoretical approaches widely used in the field, with an eye toward the need to analyze language as a social construct, and it concludes by illustrating how HL can be used as an alternative approach which overcomes the identified theoretical weaknesses.

Chapter 6 starts off the second part of the volume by looking at how two different commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) games were employed in real-world classes. The discussion in this chapter focuses primarily on how the games were integrated into the classes, and how the learners and teachers made use of them. Although only selected qualitative data are provided, and no information is offered about how the use of the games in this study interacted with language learning, the chapter does include an interesting discussion of how the games influenced the students' emotions, and how the teachers responded to being required to use the games in their classes. This discussion would be particularly useful for those looking to integrate games into classes of teachers and students who may not share the researcher's views on the use of digital games for language learning.

The next study, presented in Chapter 7, discusses some preliminary research on the selection of avatars in digital role-playing games (RPGs). The researchers looked at whether learners preferred to select avatars that more closely resembled themselves or not, and the implications of this for game efficacy and design, as it could influence how willing participants are to fully immerse themselves in the game. This study is an excellent example of the type of research that is focused on one specific game design decision, as called for in several other chapters in this same volume, and thus provides an example for future research to model.

Another example of a study where real-world participants were involved is found in Chapter 8. In this study, an augmented reality tool was used to help teach students of Japanese at a university in Japan both how to respond in the context of a natural disaster and the vocabulary related to natural disasters in Japanese. One advantage of this chapter is that a lot of detail is provided, so that other researchers can build on this work, and so that educators can see how they could follow the methodology in their own courses. As such, this chapter is another great example for future research.

Chapters 9 and 10 take a different approach by looking at how gaming outside the classroom can potentially benefit learners. In Chapter 9, the researchers look at the survey responses from several hundred students about their gaming habits and digital literacy outside of the classroom. Their findings indicate that gaming for pleasure may possibly lead to greater digital literacy. In Chapter 10, findings from a longitudinal case study of a Swedish boy who plays vernacular games in the second language (L2) of English are provided. As with other similar case studies with older participants, this study found

that playing games for pleasure in the target language (TL) led to significant advances in mastery of the TL. Together, these two studies reinforce the notion that gaming can be beneficial for language learning, especially when engaged in voluntarily outside of the classroom.

The last part of the volume, consisting of Chapters 11 and 12, takes a critical look at the current trends in the field and identifies ways in which researchers need to change the current trajectory of research in the field, in order to help it move forward. Several very important points are made in these chapters, but the main point made in both chapters is that we need more research that looks specifically at the use of games in the classroom. The authors point out that we have too much hype and too many exploratory studies, and hardly any down and dirty applied studies of games actually being used in language classes. Additionally, the point is forcefully made that researchers need to provide educators with specific details as to exactly how they can use games in the classroom. Because this is not happening, games are not being used in the classroom, and practitioners are becoming disillusioned with the hype. For example, they point out that in spite of the plethora of articles and chapters extolling the virtues of MMOGs for language classrooms, not a single empirical study to date has been conducted that actually shows the results of using MMOGs in a language classroom. These two chapters should be required reading for all researchers in the field of game-based language teaching.

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.