DIGITAL GAMES AS LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Digital games have been very popular for several decades and now play a major part in most young people’s lives. Like many technologies, those supporting virtual worlds seem to be ahead of the learning theories on how best to use them. Though digital games are starting to be used for education in other countries, here in Bulgaria educators are still ignoring the learning potentials of gaming. The widespread stereotype is that games are a waste of time and many educators are sceptical about their effects on learners.

KEY WORDS: situational learning, digital games, education, game-related activities

INTRODUCTION:

Digital games have been very popular for several decades and now play a major part in most young people’s lives. Like many technologies, those supporting virtual worlds seem to be ahead of the learning theories on how best to use them. Though digital games are starting to be used for education in other countries, here in Bulgaria educators are still ignoring the learning potentials of gaming. The widespread stereotype is that games are a waste of time and many educators are sceptical about their effects on learners.

Computer games matter because they are highly engaging, presenting simulated realities and letting gamers assume roles otherwise inaccessible. These virtual worlds give players the opportunity to learn through experience. Digital games matter because they create new social and cultural worlds of shared interests and social interaction. The clearest examples are massively multiplayer online games where thousands of players participate in various virtual worlds with their own economies, struggles, political systems and cultures. Gamers look for and maintain news sites, read and write FAQs (frequently asked questions), post in discussion forums, and most importantly, become critical users of information. Digital games certainly are an excellent source of entertainment, and due to their interactivity they can be effectively used for learning. Educators could benefit by studying the communities that form around gaming, in order to understand what contributes to the engaging activity that is digital game playing and how to use its power as a constructive force in education.
In ICT language learning is realized in different directions - structural, functional, cognitive. This article presents digital games in the cognitive field and reviews two of their educational aspects: game-related activities in the language classroom and learning language directly from a digital game.

GAME-RELATED ACTIVITIES

Students' hobbies and personal interests and experiences are often foundations for classroom activities, so it seems likely that some students and teachers may be interested in discussing games, or having instruction centred around games. Jordan (1992) discussed activities that can be done with games and pairs or small groups of language learners: note taking and reporting with sports games, problem-solving and negotiating with text adventure games, decision making and negotiating with resource management programs, and interpreting clues, discussing, and retelling with branching story simulations. Carrier (1991) similarly described the integration of games in the classroom as collaborative, communication-fostering activities.

Taylor described the incorporation of Maxis' 1989 game *Sim City* (a city planning simulation) into the language classroom, not only with a student playing the standard game individually, but also by groups recreating cities at a certain historical period (this required student research, planning, map-making, negotiating, writing, and reporting skills). Taylor mentioned the usefulness of sharing identical *Sim City* files among an entire class, or between schools or pen pals, and then posting and discussing reflections on gameplay on an Internet site. Coleman (2002) described another use of a commercial digital game—*Sim Copter* (Maxis, 1997)—in a second language classroom. The author used the different perspectives in the game (from the cockpit of a helicopter and from the view of a person walking around the same city) to teach the importance of considering audience in writing (in this case, of directions). Reinders (2009) suggested seven ideas for teaching writing using computers and games: having students investigate game characters and stories, having students describe their online game characters, having students discuss game screenshots, having students write down their in-game choices, having students text chat in online games and printing those chat logs for language analysis, having students build a website to help non-native speakers play English games, and having students create and present simple games.

In 2008 the Third Force R&D team met with industry leaders to discuss games-based learning and were particularly impressed with tools like Mission Maker which allows young people to make their own impressive 3D games. Already in use by schools across the UK, this software enables young children and teenagers to learn how to create a gripping narrative using interactive spaces, multimedia and engaging dialogue, which is an effective approach when studying a language.

LEARNING LANGUAGE DIRECTLY FROM A DIGITAL GAME

As languages are pervasive in the real world, the virtual world is full of the use of language as well. A more visually believable world intrigues the interests of game designers to tell stories in
their games. Adopting the classic media, game designers use languages occasionally to explain the progress of the game story. In order to project more believing game characters, they start to “talk”. This is when the playing of computer games is again related to linguistic skills. Players are placed in virtual situational learning environments. Like a text-based adventure game, without understanding the language, they can hardly proceed in the game. Apart from these, the story scenarios are sometimes told in the form of textual languages by a narrator. The players must understand some of these narrations in order to know the goal of the game. It is basically impossible to play the game without knowing the dialogue – a hugely motivating factor to learn.

Another type of computer games, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), suggests different way of language use in games. The designers no longer script all the languages in the game, as they do when all the characters, except for the player, are generated by computer. These MMOG games actually encourage social interaction by enacting stories through collaborative tasks as well as chatting. The shift of language use can be seen - from language perception - to language production in computer games, although language perception remains important. The players are invited to construct sentences which are related to the virtual social setting in the game. Team-based gaming encourages coordinated actions even in situations where there is no appointed leader. Negotiation of artefacts (buying, selling, exchanging) become an important part of role playing games (RPGs). In MMOGs, the player groups usually utilise some amount of communicative action in order to collaborate in certain tasks. Most of the negotiations during consensus seeking are executed through language-based communication, thus, making language the main tool for this action.

Here are some types of the social interaction language used in a first person shooter multiplayer game Wolfenstein Enemy Territory (2003): scripted in-game voice chat lines in both German and English – players can talk using the available voiced lines, and even script and voice their own for the others to use! Game chat - involves talks related to the creative play in the game; conflict chat - includes cheating, banning of the players and rules talk, talks to mediate conflicts or to invoke conflicts; insulting chat – players taunt, insult and annoy; performance chat - talk about performing in the game, how to play better, helping others, talks about strategy, mission, failure, victory; technical and external chat – game and computer related terminology; lag, ping, scheduling, other games, talk about technical matters, as well as general everyday chat.

Another example of an online virtual world used for social interaction is Linden Lab’s Second Life http://secondlife.com/. Launched in 2003, it differs from other massive multiplayer online games in one critical way – it does not have game-play at its core. In this environment, cyber land is bought and sold, markets selling virtual goods thrive and a new currency (the linden dollar) has been created. The people who are coming to this online universe aren’t just socializing – they’re also doing business, collaborating on research, teaching courses and meeting new people.
There is a growing body of evidence that some characteristics of games have a positive role in learning settings. Gaming technologies developed specifically for educational purposes are improving, often in an attempt to emulate the engagement factor offered by commercial computer games. Certainly the power of games to persuade has already been adopted by advertisers, who produce witty, quick-hit games playable on a web page or as fast, free download. Digital games definitely provide some solutions to certain aspects of language learning especially in generating motivation and pleasure in the learners. In future, however, it is hoped that digital games would attract more of the educators' attention and more games will be designed as a virtual learning environment in which learners gather and engage in linguistic communication, learned from games and from each other.

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