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Blending Video Games Into Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Around 2 billion people worldwide engage in video games and a similar number of English language learners are anticipated by the year 2020. It can be assumed that many language learners are also 'gamers', and that a language learner may play a video game to learn English. This article focuses on the language learning affordances in offline video games. General game-based learning principles identified by Gee are used as the method to identify and classify the learning affordances in a selection of video games. These learning principles are explained and then used to detail general learning opportunities inherent in a variety of video games. It suggests that language learning opportunities on video-games are too varied and that the scaffolding guidance of a teacher might be needed. It concludes by proposing that contextualized live video-game-like immersive experiences could also be conducive to language learning.

KEYWORDS

Blended-Learning, English, Gamification, Language learning, Video Games

INTRODUCTION

Not all learners are keen video game players (Godwin-Jones, 2016, p. 14) and the language required to interact within video games can be overwhelming for novice learners. However, there are more than 2 billion video game players worldwide (Newzoo, 2016; Michaud, 2011) and the number of active learners of English is predicted to be more than 1.9 billion by 2020 (IH London 2014; British Council 2013: 2). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that many video game players are also language learners and that many English language learners choose to play games to improve their English.

Different types of video game genres present different experiences. Role-playing games require decision-making and have branching narratives that change in accordance with player decisions (Gee, 2005), Simulation games replicate real-world situations in virtual environments where time and physical context are compressed, and Exploration let players freely roam an atmospheric virtual environment, interacting with objects and discovering story details (Parkin & Stuart, 2015). It is possible that language learning can occur by playing games of these genres. Studies have reported positive effects such as improvements in participation, pronunciation, and writing as a result of playing games (Ahmed, 2012). Other studies suggest playing games leads to improvements in declarative-

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knowledge, procedural-knowledge, knowledge-retention, and self-efficacy (Vogel et al., 2006), and developments in comprehension, application, analysis, and evaluation skills (Sitzmann, 2011).

The interactive aspects of games and how audio-visual presentation can benefit learners has been reported as under-researched (Vorderer & Bryant, 2009 p. 15). Questions concerning how the learning potential of playing games and participating in associated activities can be used in language development and informing educational content also need further exploration (Godwin-Jones, 2016; Reinhardt & Sykes, 2012; Williamson, 2009, p. 10, deHaan, 2005). Overall, video games are yet to be realistically considered as a language learning technology. For this to happen a combination between innovative technology use and dependable pedagogy is required (Thomas, 2011), which is ultimately the goal of this project.

METHODOLOGY

This study identified learning opportunities in video games, considered them in relation to language learning systems and strategies, and contemplated their integration into contemporary language teaching. To do this, it identified and categorised examples of learning affordances, specifically those related to presentation and motivation factors, in analysing how the visual and interactive contexts of language of games are beneficial for language learners and could be incorporated into language teaching.

To ascertain whether video games are appropriate language learning tools this study assumed that learners are either fans of playing video games or willingly engaging with video games to learn English. It also considered learners to be studying at approximately CEFR B1 level (CEFR, 2011) as this would mean they possessed appropriate skills in recognising and interpreting information, straightforward instructions, different text types, and various aspects of language to successfully interact with a video game in the language they are learning.

Gee's observations of games as customisable learning opportunities that suit individual learners and encourage adaptive approaches to learning (2013; 2007; 2005) were used to identify examples of learning possibilities, or "affordances", in a number of contemporary "offline" video games. His "Empowered Learners" principles focus on how games engage learners by allowing them to assume a productive role in designing and altering the experience. "Problem Solving" considers the challenges that video games offer learners, how they are presented, what scaffolding and support are provided, and player motivations. The "Understanding" principles highlight how video games can strengthen behaviours and embed values, as well as how games provide meaning to words and concepts (see Figure 1).

Identified examples of potential language learning opportunities in games were compared and contrasted with theories such as 'noticing' and 'autonomy'. The cognitive benefits of exposure to written and auditory text, and the extent to which linguistic features and extralinguistic clues help learners to notice gaps in their English language knowledge, were also used in evaluating the potential for the use of video games in learning. In some instances, examples of how video games can be used in language teaching have been suggested.

Figure 1. Gee's video game learning principles (2013)

Category	Principles
Empowered Learners	Co-design, Customize, Identity, Manipulation and Distributed Knowledge
Problem Solving	Well-Ordered Problems, Pleasantly Frustrating, Cycles of Expertise, Information "On Demand" and "Just in Time", Fish Tanks, Sandboxes, Skills as Strategies
Understanding	System Thinking, Meaning as Action Image

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