TECHNOLOGY—"Just" Playing Games? A Look at the Use of Digital Games for Language Learning

By Julie M. Sykes

From exploring local landmarks in the mobile game *Mentira* to traversing the difficult landscape of adulthood in *LifeQuest*, the world of digital games has much to offer those interested in teaching and learning a second language. Harnessing the potential of such games for language learning can be rewarding yet challenging. Take, for example, the sheer number of existing games to consider, not to mention the continually growing number of tools for creating digital games targeted at specific learning objectives. Some games, however, are particularly useful for language educators and there are specific projects and activities which can be replicated and implemented by those interested in using digital games in their classroom. Much like the digital realms people often explore when gaming, work in digital games and learning is vast. Numerous resources are available for those interested in delving deeper into the topic.

Why Digital Games?

Digital game principles offer a way to overcome challenges of the language classroom that are difficult, if not impossible, via other means. While many have proposed digital games for learning all dimensions of a language, they are, in fact especially suited to overcoming challenges related to complex areas such as intercultural competence, pragmatics, and learning and performance strategies. Instead of setting these elements aside for study abroad contexts and immersion programs, instructors can utilize digital games to address them in the language classroom as well.

In addition, digital game design offers a new perspective to our overall understanding of language learning and teaching. I often imagine my students begging to complete one more level of their Spanish game before coming to dinner, the way they often do with games played for purely entertainment purposes. In a volume designed for educators working in the foreign language context, this author and a co-author highlighted five areas where the parallels between digital game design and second language acquisition principles are especially relevant: **goals, interaction, feedback, context,** and **motivation**. [See *Language at Play: Digital Games in Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning* by Julie Sykes and Jonathon Reinhardt, 2012.]

- **Goals** are best described as "goal orientation" due to the dynamic, ongoing, and continually negotiated process of task completion. This game-mediated perspective highlights the critical nature of learner-driven experiences that are authenticated through play and participation. Goal orienting offers a solution to the use of static, learning-driven tasks that are, in many cases, unsuccessful. Effective use of digital games maintains learner choices without sacrificing instructional demands of the classroom environment. This is a difficult mission made possible by the ever-evolving nature of goals and tasks in digital game spaces.

- **Interaction** can occur on a number of levels depending on the type of game, the way the game is used, and the players' perceived value of the interactive experience. These interactions can occur with, through, around, and about the game. With intentioned use, digital games offer a meaningful context for interaction that is not simulated, but rather emerges as part of the gameplay experience in the classroom.

- In terms of **feedback**, digital games are especially effective at providing meaningful resources to learners at exactly the right level, time, and amount. Thus, the player is always aware of his or her abilities. In addition, failure becomes a primary teaching mechanism with multiple opportunities to achieve success, even if it means engaging with a task multiple times. By drawing on feedback mechanisms present in digital games, instructors have the opportunity to give their learners feedback at every turn, instead of occasionally after a test, oral scenario, or writing assignment.

- **Context** is created and authenticated by both the game narrative and context of play. Game narratives, characters, and communities can be especially powerful for developing second language literacies both in and around a game. In addition, their powerful narratives can serve as catalysts for discussion

Learn More at the 2013 ACTFL Annual Convention in Orlando

Jonathan Reinhardt and Julie Sykes will be presenting a pre-convention workshop, Thursday, November 21, 9:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m., entitled **Gamification for Language Learning** (W311 C-D, Orange County Convention Center). Participants who are curious, unsure, or excited about online games and their role in the classroom will benefit by exploring the potential of digital games to enhance language learning. Experience and analyze a variety of software that has been successfully implemented in language classrooms, develop game-enhanced activities that are useful for language learning, and discuss ways games and game-informed principles may be useful in your own teaching and learning context. (Note: Pre-convention workshops require additional registration/fees.)

of key literary texts through comparisons of themes, characters, and settings.

- **Motivation** is often cited as the key reason for integrating digital games in the language classroom. Good design elements, including goal orientation, interaction, feedback, and narratives are key to making a game engaging—or terrible. Thus, an instructor must always be aware of the many different factors that may or may not influence motivation. In our experience, while games can be engaging, it is usually the experience of learning elements of language (such as politeness and intercultural competence) which prove to be the true motivators.

What to Consider for the Language Classroom

A number of key considerations will help language educators navigate the world of digital games.

Commercial and Educational Games

Many make the distinction between "serious" educational games and commercial games built for entertainment purposes, with the former often being seen as superior. Instead, it is useful to consider both educational and commercial games as potentially useful for language teaching and learning, depending on the objective of the instructor. While commercial games might stray from the specific vocabulary or grammar of a curriculum, they offer a great deal in terms of authenticity, ease of use, and access to attendant discourses related to associated discourse communities.

Classroom activities using commercial games might include analysis of the gameplay experience targeting specific vocabulary, language functions, or cultural themes. For example, learners could be directed to keep a game journal in which they are asked to record relevant information such as characters, setting, language, and/or reflect on their in-game choices. This experience then serves as background knowledge for other classroom activities such as speaking tasks or writing assignments. In the box to the right is a sample game journal activity that can be used with students (shown here in English, but could be in target language).

Game-based environments, that is, those created for educational purposes, can target specific learning outcomes, tasks, and local communities, creating a strong advantage. However, before deciding to use an educational game, one must be especially aware of the game mechanics and outcomes. In fact, if not designed well, educational games may be viewed as "hokey" or silly by learners and do not take advantage of many of the features discussed above. Critical evaluation of games designed specifically for language learning is just as important as the process used for commercial games.

Likewise, when creating their own games, educators must take into account game design principles. In game-based spaces, the content itself targets the learning objectives and gameplay can serve as a powerful learning and assessment tool. If a learner reaches a certain point in the game, he or she has successfully mastered the material. In addition, a game journal, such as the one shown here, or other wrap-around activities can also be useful. Whatever choice

Activity: Game Journal (with sample entry in italics)

Fill out the information in the columns about your game experiences. You should have at least three entries by [the due date].

Name: *Erica*
Game: *A Castle in Time*

Entry	1	2	3
Date and amount of time spent playing.	*Nov 11, 10 min.*		
What did you do in the game?	*I searched the beach for treasure chests.*		
Describe one task that you did.	*I used a shovel to dig up the chests.*		
Explain why you did it.	*Some of the treasure chests contain keys to unlock the castle gate.*		
Explain what you will do the next time you play.	*I want to find the princess in the courtyard.*		
What new strategies did you learn about the game?	*If you use a magic shovel it takes less time to dig.*		
Something you liked or disliked.	*I think the throne room was really beautiful, but I am getting annoyed at the music.*		

Sample Game Journal (from Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012, p. 29)

the instructor makes, the critical component is what is done with the game, not its original purpose for creation. Selecting a game can be difficult and time-consuming. A game evaluation framework for selecting games, as well as game reviews and sample activities, can be found at **games2teach.wordpress.com**.

To Play or to Design

Another key consideration is that of playing the game or designing the game. When deciding to use digital games in the classroom, we most often think of the learners playing the game. Numerous activities can be useful for making gameplay meaningful and relevant to

Let's Go MOBILE

Place-based, augmented reality games offer a unique opportunity for language educators to enhance students' interaction with local communities. While many mobile applications take advantage of the portability of mobile devices, few fully realize the potential of place-based, augmented reality for language learning. In addition to on-the-go access, mobile devices offer a number of features relevant to creating personalized learning experiences that are socially constructed and place a strong importance on place. While a complete discussion is not possible here, a few sample projects highlight the ways in which mobile games can be especially useful for language learning. Each is freely available through the ARIS application (*www.arisgames.org*) on iOS devices.

RIGHT: Students play Mentira *in Los Griegos (C. Holden)*

FAR RIGHT: ChronoOps *screenshot (S. Thorne)*
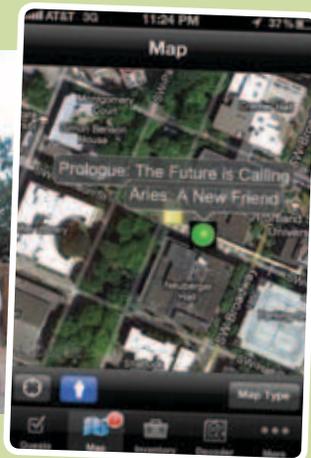
Mentira (***www.mentira.org***) is a place-based, mobile game for learning Spanish (created by Holden & Sykes, 2009). Set in a local neighborhood in Albuquerque, NM, learners first play at home and then must work in groups to discover clues while traversing the actual neighborhood to solve a murder mystery. After their experience in the neighborhood, clues are then used to defend their family members in a trial that takes place in the classroom.

ChronoOps is a place-based game set in Portland, OR, in which learners use complex language functions to explore environmental issues in the city (Thorne, 2012). A variety of versions have been built for different levels of learners, including an ESL version for the Intensive English Language Program at Portland State University. In the game, learners must save the planet by traveling back in time and exploring alternative uses of energy and resources.

the second language development process. These include reflection, analysis, and extension activities (see examples on the next page). However, game design can also be a powerful language learning tool. By creating goals, narratives, and content, learners must engage in the language at a level beyond that of playing the game. Design can be related to an entirely new game or as an add-on to a game they have played (e.g., create a new character or design a new level). A design activity, for example, might ask learners to identify the objective of gameplay and create a storyboard of a meaningful task to meet that objective or to redesign the narrative of a game based on a canonical piece of literature they have read. (For additional design activity ideas, see Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012.)

Integration

The successful use of digital games in the classroom requires integration into other elements of the curriculum. The use of games as ancillary homework tasks and extra credit activities does not allow for intentioned use or success as a component of the overall learning objectives of the course. Integration can include, for example, the use of game content as pre-writing content for a writing task or as an impetus for a classroom debate. In addition, a design task might take the place of a more traditional writing task, following the same multi-draft process to teaching writing skills and strategies.

Resources for Language Educators

Games, Learning, and Society
www.gameslearningsociety.org
A research group at the University of Wisconsin which "delves into how video games capture our imaginations, how their power can be used to transform learning, and what this engaging medium means to society."

Institute of Play
www.instituteofplay.org
A design center focusing on digital games and learning. They aim to "design experiences that make learning irresistible."

Games to Teach
games2teach.wordpress.org
A project to aid language educators in evaluating and implementing digital games in the K–16 foreign language classroom. Resources include sample activities, activity design frameworks, and game evaluations in addition to papers and annual workshops for educators. Games to Teach is funded through the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language, and Literacy (CERCLL) at the University of Arizona.

Language at Play: Digital Games in Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. Sykes, J. & Reinhardt, J. (2012). New York: Pearson.
Provides a synthesis of key principles of language learning and game design for classroom use. The volume includes practical scenarios, reflection questions, and classroom activities related to digital games.

Illustrative Projects

The implementation of the principles and considerations described above can happen in a variety of learning contexts, at all levels of proficiency, and with many content areas ranging from beginning language learning to advanced levels of literary analysis. The two sample projects on this page, and in the sidebar on mobile games on p. 34, represent a snapshot of these diverse possibilities.

LifeQuest: A look at cultural expectations through a commercial game
Publisher: Big Fish Games
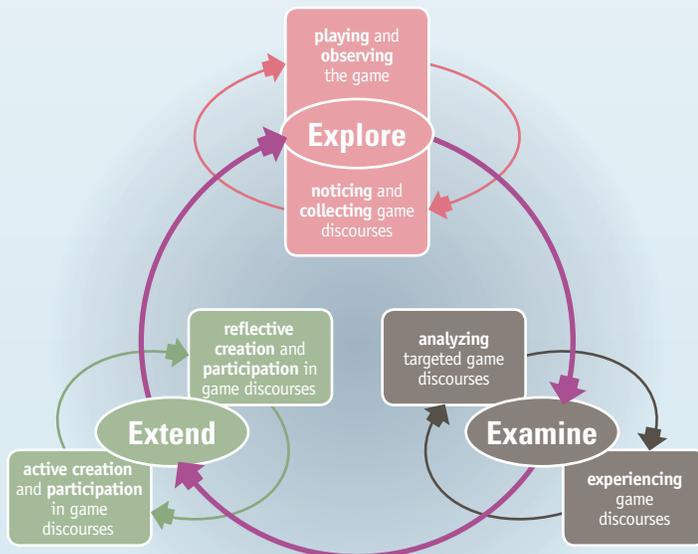Activity Creation: J. Reinhardt, J. Sykes
Level: Beginning, High School
Complete Activity Set: *www.games2teach.wordpress.com/publications*

Drawing on a framework for activity design using games in the classroom, this project highlights three stages for the use of *LifeQuest* in the language classroom.

Game Activity Design Framework (Reinhardt, 2011)

1. **Explore:** Activities involve learning to play the game, observing how it is played, and noticing and collecting game discourses.
2. **Examine:** Activities focus more intently on playing the game critically and analyzing game discourses, both those noted by students and those targeted by instruction.
3. **Extend:** Activities involve the active and reflective creation of, and participation in, game discourses that are attendant to the game. It is a simple, time-efficient model for game-enhanced activities utilizing commercial games in the classroom.

Visitas de la colonia: Game design to connect historical contexts with current day ideologies
Platform: ARIS (*www.arisgame.org*)
Creators: K. McKnight, C. Holden, J. Sykes
Level: Advanced, University
Context: Colonial Literature Class

Sample Clue, Visitas de la colonia *(K. Mcknight)*

In *Visitas de la colonia*, students utilize content from an upper-division Spanish course on colonial literature combined with local, relevant locations on the university campus to create a peer-to-peer experience for reinforcing many of the main concepts learned throughout the course. In the sample clue above, the creators' classmates must guess who the visitante (visitor) is based on their interaction with the guide. They then continue to explore why they are interested in the place related to the clue. In this project, game design becomes the primary learning tool as students work to create clues and play experiences for their peers. Furthermore, it highlights the ways in which past and present can be combined to transform literary studies courses and reveals ways in which mobile games can enhance this experience. To create successful game content, learners must not only understand and interpret the content of the literary works and characters, but also the ways in which they relate to their current lives.

Play! Play! Play!

While digital games offer many benefits for language instructors and learners alike, they are not without their problems and, likewise, are not a solution for all language learning contexts, tasks, or content. In fact, too many games, the wrong game, or thoughtless creation and implementation can be problematic. As technological tools continue to advance, more and more digital games will undoubtedly emerge on the market. Just like any other pedagogical tool, their use should be thoughtful, intentioned, and critical. Most of all, we should urge our learners to play and thoughtfully explore the digital world in ways that add value to their language learning experiences.

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