

Guest Editorial Preface

Special Issue on Digital Games in Language Education: Methodological Considerations

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‘Digital game-based language learning and teaching’ (DGBLLT) is an umbrella term for a wide range of activities that involve some form of engagement with digital games for the purposes of enhancing language learning and teaching. There are variations in contexts, as with gaming in or beyond the classroom; communities of players, either single or multi-player games; game products, with commercial off-the-shelf games or teacher-customized games; game types, such as closed or open world; and the inclusion of other game-related artefacts. DGBLLT can range from basic vocabulary or grammar games (such as are commonly found on mobile devices), to games with full immersion in virtual worlds or massively multi-player online role-playing games. DGBLLT also comprises the consumption and production of game-related texts, such as in walkthroughs and fan fiction. Such games and related artifacts do not need to be specifically designed for language learning purposes; many players, teachers and researchers choose to interact in existing games in a foreign language. This multiplicity of manifestations of DGBLLT adds excitement but also methodological challenge to this field.

The methodological considerations in digital games in language education can broadly be categorized into a) how games can be investigated in language research; and b) how games can be used to investigate language education. In this special issue, we want to introduce four empirical studies that provide stimulating thoughts on these two aspects of methodological considerations.

As mentioned, the diversity in game types and play poses challenges to methods of collecting data. Zhao (this issue) examines a less-explored aspect of individual variation, or “the differences between L2 learners in terms of how they use language to coordinate their game play in the moment” (pp. XX), by investigating two gamers’ game-playing and language learning trajectories. The study adopted a broad combination of surveys, interviews, recording of in-game interaction, participation in discussion groups, and gaming journals to collect data. As participants from various linguistic backgrounds played a game in their target language, the use of the language became an opportunity for languaging. As Zhao points out, one methodological challenge is trying to collect multimodal data when the actual gaming and learning activities happened on multiple platforms and with multiple software systems.

As with Zhao’s study, which invites researchers to contemplate the challenges of collecting multimodal languaging data, Ibrahim faces the challenge of collecting multiple sources of data to reconstruct the language learning processes that occur during game play. Ibrahim provides an

analytical framework to reconstruct the game play session from a complex set of data. His proposed framework highlights that different multiple data sources provide insights into different perspectives to the same gaming episode, and it is only through reconstruction that we can get a holistic picture of the episode. Similar to Zhao, Ibrahim also argues that it is important to consider how researchers view a gaming episode, or the learning from an episode, as the product of the interaction between the gamer-learner, the game and other relevant interfaces, and the broader gaming community. Thus when we are examining the game as researchers and gaming in education, we are not only investigating an independent episode, but the whole ecology of gaming.

While the studies by Zhao and Ibrahim focus on understanding how language learning happens during game play, both researchers used commercial off-the-shelf games as the primary spaces for interaction and learning. In a classroom context, the use of a game with no supplementary teaching activities may not be a realistic practice. Shintaku explores how a supplementary set of teaching materials may enhance Japanese learning through an authentic vernacular game. The findings suggest that such a combination provides innovative and varied exposure to authentic language, which is especially beneficial for vocabulary learning. This study challenges the concept that language learning through digital game playing may happen mostly ‘in the wild’, or beyond the classroom. Again, as digital game play has already become a regular fixture in contemporary living and playing, shouldn’t digital games be tamed just as pop music or fiction or media for use in the classroom?

Whereas Shintaku created a supplementary set of learning materials, Hadjistassou and Molka-Danielsen investigated how a teacher brought her gaming and programming expertise to create an immersive virtual learning environment. The detailing of her game designs to enrich the language exchange experiences among the learners demonstrated the complexity of task design when a digital game is involved. The task has to be considered from both pedagogical and technological perspectives, and Hadjistassou and Molka-Danielsen added an evaluation dimension. Through their study we get a glimpse that integrating virtual world learning is a similar development process to every other type of curricular development. This study, together with Shintaku’s study, encourages to regard digital games in language education as a regular part of materials and curriculum development.

Together, these studies provide a fascinating insight into the methodological challenges and opportunities offered by DGBLLT and suggest ways forward for future research in this exciting and still-developing area.

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