

Book Review

Book Review on Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development, and Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Digital games have burgeoned steadily around the world, but how they can be used in language learning is still an area to be explored. The book *Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development, and Implementation* came into being offering multiple perspectives on the application of digital games in language education, including how these games are designed, developed, and implemented to maximise the language-learning under the guidance of learning theories. The editors of this book insightfully point out that in the digital age, different modes of language learning are required, new ways of designing games are needed and theoretical studies incorporating critical perspectives of the games for language learning can move the field forward.

KEYWORDS

Digital Games, Language Education, Language Learning

Digital games have burgeoned steadily around the world, but how they can be used in language learning is still an area to be explored. It is desirable to know how the digital games are designed, developed and implemented, including the commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) and tailor-made language learning games, to maximise the learning outcome. This book has timely come into being to meet this demand by offering multiple perspectives on the application of digital games in language education, especially under the guidance of learning theories.

The editors of this book, Mark Peterson (Associate Professor of Linguistics at Kyoto University, Japan), Kasumi Yamazaki (Associate Professor of Japanese at the University of Toledo) and Michael Thomas (Professor of Education at Liverpool John Moores University, UK), insightfully point out that in the digital age, different modes of language learning are required, new ways of designing games are needed, theoretical studies are called for, and critical perspectives are welcomed to move the field forward. This view is in line with Dubreil (2020) who claims that digital game design needs to be combined with language learning pedagogy to enable students to think critically and contribute meaningful solutions to the challenges in language learning. Continued research that investigates how gaming elements in digital learning environment facilitates language learning is needed (Xu et al., 2020).

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As part of the investigation, the editors of this book organise the most updated research into three sections: 1) Digital games and language learning, 2) Development and implementation of computer-assisted language learning, and 3) Towards the future of game-based language learning. The first section provides the rationale that guides digital games for language education and thus readers can understand how learning theories are applied to the design of digital games that boost language practice. Silvia Benini and Michael Thomas start the section with an overview of the positive effects of digital games on language learning and the challenges encountered, including 1) technical, 2) identity, 3) culture, 4) collaboration, 5) time, 6) economic, 7) standards, 8) scaffolding issues. Following the critical overview, Nasser Jabbari investigates massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs) for language learning with an emphasis on the theoretical perspective, including the theories of communication in psychology, functional vs structural realism in sociology, and human linguistics in anthropology, for readers to understand the constructs for language learning in MMOGs. By further analysing MMOGs, Jonathon Reinhardt summarises the factors that make the games effective for language learning, and advocates the survival, open-world, and team cooperation design type for affordances in language learning gaming ecology, with the designer's perspective as a key factor. By using human linguistics as a framework for analysing simulation gaming, Douglas W. Coleman focuses on the construct of realism, which lays the foundation for sim-gaming and learning for communication. The key concepts and frameworks in the first section constitute the backbone of the whole book on digital games for language education.

The second section recounts different dimensions of the development and implementation of digital games in language learning. To start with, Alex Bacalja and Kate Euphemia Clark make a comparison of two ways that digital games are used as texts in the language classroom: one uses a game alongside traditional texts with the pedagogy of helping students understand how different text types construct indigenous stories. The other is experiencing digital game aligned with the pedagogy of experiential reading. The result demonstrates how the former is constrained by teachers' perceptions of digital games, while in the latter case, how the students take an immense and open-world attitude towards digital game and acknowledge its role as an active participant in the construction of learning. The study illustrates that digital games have gone beyond a tool for learning but have become a learning experience. Next, avatars in digital role-playing games for language learning is examined by Charly Harbord, Euan Dempster and Darshana Jayemanne, illustrating that the type of avatars digital games plays a significant role in language learning. This is because by choosing an avatar that closely represents the target culture, the player is able to try out 'identity tourism', thereby feeling less anxious when interacting with the perceived native speaker. Furthermore, Kazuhiro Yonemoto examines the effectiveness of implementing gamification that utilises augmented reality technology to reinforce students' language skills, demonstrating that it is helpful to provide learners with opportunities to use and practise language in a meaningful context. From the angle of new literacies of digital natives, Daniel J. Mills and Benjamin Thanyawatpokin investigate the role that digital games play in the formation of the twenty-first-century skills, and how these skills correlate with digital game usage outside the classroom. The study results illustrate that students regard digital games as an extramural learning tool and playing digital games both in-class and out-of-class can help solidify the 21st century skills, including learning skills, literacy skills and life skills. With a longitudinal study for 3 years, Liss Kerstin Sylven conducts an in-depth study on how the learner gains language proficiency via playing digital games and by watching YouTube clips. The learner's high level of language proficiency at the end of the study gives evidence on the beneficial impact of exposure to the language and such exposure on enhancing the learner's language skills. The second section offers a comprehensive summary of how digital games are used in a variety of contexts, formal and informal, in-class and out-of-class, learning environments. What is innovative here is that the authors move from digital games only to broadening its scope associated with language learning pedagogy to contribute to the knowledge and skills required for the 21st century. It is through how the digital games in a variety of contexts that the meaningful disciplinary understanding of knowledge construction cohabit.

The third section directs readers to the future of digital game-based language learning. Benjamin Thanyawatpokin and James York start with discussing the issues in the current state of teaching languages with games and clarifying the taxonomy of games and language learning, including MMOGs, digital COTs, tabletop games, and gamification. While drawing readers' attention to the significant digital technology and perspectives on the research trends and issues, the authors display the problematic tendency as well, including an excess of exploratory studies, and confusing terminology around learning/teaching with games. After having analysed both the positive and problematic aspects, the authors propose terms focusing on learning/teaching rather than on the game only and call for more studies featuring teacher mediation and theoretically informed implementation of games. Jonathan deHaan further summarises the shift from technology only to pedagogy + technology with the angle of 'vaporware' (a computer software that is announced to the public but not actually manufactured yet), which perfectly fits in as the last chapter of the book directing to the future. In a humorous way, Jonathan encourages language teachers and researchers to work together to 'pull the plug on GBCT (announcement of the potential of a new technology)', with concrete suggestions of working on communication games, vocabulary games, worksheets games and games as 'time-fillers', and all these games offer thought-provoking pathways for language learning. The authors in the third section suggest that for language learning to be successful, digital games need to be built on the pedagogy which leads to deeper learning episodes that respond to learners' needs.

To evaluate the whole book, it synthesises a plethora of the most recent theoretical and empirical research with ample examples of pedagogical practice, which offers insights of an innovative, diverse, and adaptable approach to digital games in language learning. It embraces different views by both advocates and critics on the subjects, offering a more diverse, unbiased, and enlightening look into how digital games are applied to language learning, and this broad representation is laudable in that it sheds new light on the digital game application for our further understanding of this area objectively. Compared with books on similar topics, e.g., *Digital Games in Language Learning and Teaching* edited by Reinders (2012), this book breaks boundaries between digital technology and language learning, makes it clearer about the future trends, and thus appeals to a wide range of readers including game designers, researchers, and language teaching practitioners. The readers can understand more clearly why digital language teaching is necessary and how it is developing now and in the future by providing evidence to show how the world is changing: the learners are changing, the technologies are changing, and the learning modes are changing.

However, it will be gratifying to see perspectives from bigger user groups learning different languages, or more challenges they might face. It will also be interesting to see how learners use different kinds of digital games at different stages in their language learning process, and what components have greater impact on their learning.

In conclusion, the collective efforts of the international team of researchers in Australia, Japan, Sweden, USA and the UK etc. contribute to the knowledge of theory-based game design, offer detailed accounts of practice and point out the trend for future development. The future volumes can expand to include digital games for larger language learner groups, different languages and language learners at different levels. Overall, this book moves the agenda of digital games for language learning forward.

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