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8 things to know about
Teaching Languages with Videogames

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Thinking of trying to teach with videogames? Not sure where or how to start? Here are 8 things to inspire you and get you thinking, based on CALL research.

1. Both vernacular and educational games can be used for L2 learning

Vernacular games -- i.e., commercial, 'off-the-shelf' videogames designed for entertainment -- can be used for authentic L2 learning, and can be just as, or even more, effective than educational games designed specifically for L2 learning, especially with intermediate and advanced proficiency learners. For beginning proficiency learners, casual, easy-to-learn vernacular games might be better, played as a group. Educational games for L2 learning are harder to find, but here are a few worth checking out:

- LingroLearning: https://lingrolearning.com/ (Spanish)
- Spaceteam ESL/Astronautes FSL: http://spaceteamesl.ca/ (English & French)
- Lingotopia: https://store.steampowered.com/app/860640/Lingotopia/ (7 languages supported)
- Influent: https://store.steampowered.com/app/274980/Influent/ (16 languages supported)
- Slime Forest Adventure: https://lrnj.com/ (Japanese)

2. Some vernacular games are much better than others for L2 learning

Not all vernacular videogames are good for L2 learning, just like not all movies, books, or TV shows. Themes are quite varied, and if you look past the blockbuster games, there are a lot of hidden gems. Game features like storylines, branching dialogues, interactive objects, and captions, subtitles, and the ability to pause and repeat are great for L2 learning. Multiplayer features can be useful for collaborative L2 use if players have to communicate in order to achieve joint goals. These features are usually found in adventure, role play, simulation, and strategy genres, but can be in others too. Just because a game has these features, however, doesn't mean that players have to use

them -- and only when they do might they use the language to do so, which is why some sort of teacher guidance might be necessary.

Here are a few games to try for their L2 learning potential:

- The Settlers Online (free): https://store.steampowered.com/app/354640/The_Settlers_Online/ 13 languages supported
- Destiny 2 (free): https://store.steampowered.com/app/1085660/Destiny_2/ 13 languages supported
- World of Tanks Blitz (free): https://store.steampowered.com/app/444200/World_of_Tanks_Blitz/ 17 languages supported
- The Beginner's Guide ($9.99) https://store.steampowered.com/app/303210/The_Beginners_Guide/ 5 languages supported
- RollerCoaster Tycoon Classic ($19.99) https://store.steampowered.com/app/683900/RollerCoaster_Tycoon_Classic/ 6 languages supported
- The Sims 4 ($19.99) https://store.steampowered.com/app/1222670/The_Sims_4/ 18 languages supported
- Skyrim ($15.99) https://store.steampowered.com/app/489830/The_Elder_Scrolls_V_Skyrim_Special_Edition/ 9 languages supported

3.   The language used around and about the game is a great learning resource

Talking with others about a game, reading articles or watching videos about a videogame, or participating in an online discussion about a game can provide lots of meaningful and authentic opportunities for learning the language used to do so. There are many Twitch-based streaming and other online videos in different languages where expert players and reviewers talk through and about gaming (first browse twitch.tv for a channel and then filter by the language as a search tag). There are also fan groups of many game titles who've produced art, stories (e.g. fan fiction), and other interesting things that can serve as resources for language learning. Participating in these many practices is part of being a gamer, and for students who are so inclined, it can be a way towards finding a community of like-minded people who happen to use the language of study in order to talk about their favorite thing, gaming. Finally, there are many things written and said about gaming and game-based learning you can find in popular media for general audiences -- much of it anti-gaming as well as pro-gaming -- which for more advanced learners can serve as excellent resources for critical learning and discussion.

4.   You need to play the game before you teach with it.

To check whether the features that afford L2 learning are in a particular title, you have to play it a few times, paying attention to when and how the player is forced to comprehend and produce (or show that they comprehend) language. Imagine you're a novice gamer, an expert gamer, and on the low and high end of your students' proficiencies -- how will your students react to the game? Will they find it fun, boring, hard, too easy, or just right?

5.   It's hard to learn a new game and a new language at the same time

If you don't know how to play a game already, playing it in a language you're learning can be doubly hard, especially if the game doesn't let you pause or repeat, or penalizes you excessively for mistakes. This means that gaming skills are especially necessary with harder games and action games, if you're using them to learn another language, and why casual, simpler games might be better for gaming novices. If you do have gaming skills, though, playing a game you know and like in the L2 is an effective approach, especially if you can team up with people who probably won't care that you're a learner of their language, because your skills can help them play and win. If students do want to play a harder game, it might be better to play in teams or as a whole class, and it can helpful to do pre- and post-play supplemental activities focused on the language needed to play the game.

6.   Teachers need to help players to focus on the language use in games

Players will only focus on language insofar as it's necessary to learn to play and advance in the game. For informal, incidental learning, that's just fine, but when you want learners to pay attention to language, consider helping learners focus -- however, do it before or after the game, not during it (unless, maybe, they can pause the game and won't mind doing so). Pre-play activities focused on the vocabulary they'll encounter, and post-play activities focused on reflection and using the new vocabulary can be useful. Also consider supplementing gameplay with activities that address the skills not practiced in the game; since gameplay usually involves more receptive than production skills, these might involve speaking (like presentations), interacting with others, and writing about, reflecting on, or extending game themes. One good activity, especially for learners playing games independently, is to keep a game journal and reflect on what one is doing in the game.

7.   A game is by definition subjective, so player buy-in is key

If learners don't want to play a game for learning, don't force it on them -- if there isn't a critical mass of interested students it might be an uphill battle (although it might still be won once you start playing together). Know your students' interests and preferences, and talk about gameful learning as a real way to learn languages, and how to do it. They'll probably have opinions about it, and some might even be surprised you think it's legit. And make sure to give them choices -- maybe choose from a list of games you've pre-evaluated -- maybe a game to play as a whole class, in groups or pairs, or on their own. If they don't think it's a serious way to learn the language, they may dismiss it as frivolous, although even if they want to try, they may find it too easy or too hard. In other words, the choice of game, the supplemental activity design, and learner buy-in make all the difference.

8.   A gamified lesson is still a lesson, and a learnified game is still a game

Gamification is a buzzword some people use to refer to any use of games in language teaching and learning. However, a more exact definition is that it's the application of game design features or mechanics to activities, like lessons or curricula (or shopping or traveling), that aren't normally considered games, in order to extrinsically motivate the people doing them to achieve goals like learning (or buying or providing place-based data). Making group activities competitive, having an immersive theme for a unit perhaps

involving role play or drama, offering extra credit, and letting students re-take quizzes for fewer points could be considered gamification. Gamification can motivate some students, but it might turn off others for various reasons, so use it carefully and not without also rewarding intrinsically motivated behavior.

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