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Learning to play: Re-thinking computer games in foreign language teaching and learning

Digital gaming has become a mainstream, global cultural force, with worldwide yearly sales of video and computer games in excess of $40 billion in 2008 (wikia.com). Digital gaming are no longer a subcultural phenomenon centered on violent first person shooter games, as games are produced in most of the world’s major languages and have diversified in genre and content. While many critics declare that games are still a dangerous diversion, educational gaming proponents have begun to counter these critiques and present evidence that digital games have real potential to inform and transform education.

Informed by research in educational gaming and games studies (e.g. Raessens & Goldstein, 2005), applied linguists and foreign language educators have noted that multiplayer gaming contexts are a potentially rich context for language learning (e.g. Sykes, Reinhardt, & Thorne, 2010; Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). Some have applied socio-cognitive frameworks to investigate game-mediated interaction (e.g. Piiranen-Marsh & Tainio, 2009; Zheng et al., 2009), while others have noted that the mediated quality of digital games allows players to take on and learn through various, customizable identities, thereby developing new literacies (Gee, 2007; Thorne, 2008).

The research implicates a literacies-based approach to game-mediated foreign language pedagogy. From this perspective, digital games can be seen as cultural texts or designed narratives, at the same time they can be understood as cultural practices, where gameplay involves the interactive design of new narrative experiences. Players “learn in order to play” new texts and narratives (Arnseth, 2006), rather than “play in order to learn” educational content. The approach informs a pedagogical framework that can be used to evaluate vernacular, commercially available games for language learning potential, to design game-enhanced learning activities using vernacular, off-the-shelf games, and to develop future game-based synthetic foreign language immersive environments.

References:
Arnseth, H. C. (2006). Learning to play or playing to learn - A critical account of the models of communication informing educational research on computer gameplay. Game Studies 6, 1.


