Effective L2 Game Design for Language Learners at Play

by Jeannette Okur
Who’s Interested in Digital Game-Mediated L2 Teaching and Learning?! 

• **Just this week**, the Institute of International Education (IIE), acting as the administrative agent of the National Security Education Program (NSEP), Defense Language and National Security Education Office (DLNSEO) for The Language Flagship, accepted proposals from U.S. Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) for the development and management of a **national Flagship Technology Innovation Center** to support the mission of The Language Flagship to promote effective advanced language learning! 

• According to IIE, the primary purpose of the Flagship Technology Innovation Center will be to conceive, design, adapt or improve, deliver and test effective means to blend technology into existing Language Flagship Programs. 

• And the new Center will encourage the use of cutting edge, interactive language learning technologies such as **augmented reality games**, intelligent tutoring, online role playing, group and individual video teleconferences (VTCs) and targeted conversation practice through multiple platforms.
Primary Source for this Presentation:
Four Key Questions to Consider!

• What do you think is the most important feature of the definition of *game*? In other words, what makes a game a game?

• What do you think are the cognitive, social, and cultural functions of *play*? In other words, what is its purpose?

• What experiences do you have with language play? Do you think it is an important aspect of language learning?

• What are your preconceptions about digital games and L2TL? Have you ever used digital games for L2TL as an instructor or learner? What potentials do you think there are?
A game is a unique kind of activity around which we often find play. As such, a game reflects a set of cultural practices through which players make social meaning and, in Schell’s words, is truly defined by the imaginary experience.

If we combine game theorists’ Schell (2008) and Juul (2005) definitions, we can say that:

- A player voluntarily plays a game knowing he or she is bound by a set of rules (these can be followed or flouted).
- Games require effort to reach a goal (this goal can be open ended or clearly defined, yet it is always ultimately authenticated by the player).
- Games will often result in a variety of differing outcomes, some better than others.
- Games create an internally rewarding system.
The Usefulness of Digital Gameplay?

- Sykes and Reinhardt recognize gameplay (ie. digital gameplay) as (1) a social practice and a new form of literacy and (2) a productive model for game-informed pedagogy that can transform language learning experiences.
Five Major Parallels

In their book, they seek to highlight ways digital games can inform, enhance, and ultimately transform L2 pedagogy.

To this end, they address, and draw parallels among, five major concepts familiar to L2TL practitioners and digital game designers – goal, interaction, feedback, context, and motivation – to provide potential useful analytic and pedagogical frameworks.

This objective reflects their premise that research and practice should drive the adoption of any technological tool.
Goals: Learning tasks and goal orientation

• Digital games share goal orientation as a design feature with L2 learning tasks, but game tasks are fundamentally player driven, whereas L2 learning task design is sometimes learner driven, but often driven primarily by agents other than the learner.

• Digital games show us that goal orientation is itself a dynamic, continually negotiated, and ongoing activity.

• Authenticity is a matter of learner-player experience, rather than a quality inherent to the material itself.
Interaction: With, through, and about digital games

- L2 interaction with games can lead to the negotiation or co-construction of ideational meaning by focusing on linguistic and cultural content embedded in the game. This content can correspond to the traditional topics of L2 curricula.

- L2 interaction through or around games can lead to the negotiation or co-construction of interpersonal meaning with other players of the game during play, whether or not physically co-present.

- L2 interaction about games can lead to the emergence of textual meaning by relating game playing to broader, more meaningful contexts, including personally relevant and cultural discourses.

- Interactivity in digital games can be cognitive, functional, explicit, and cultural.
Feedback: Real-time, individualized, and instructional

• A good feedback-as-instruction model focuses on providing individualized resources to learners at the right amount, level, and time. The feedback must be meaningful, relevant, and appropriate for the action being undertaken.

• In digital games, a balance between boredom and frustration is maintained, in part, by the use of complex feedback loops. A strong balance that challenges the player at just the right level contributes to a sense of flow.

• Positive and negative feedback loops utilizing multiple feedback mechanisms form the underlying learning system of a digital game. Similar systems have the potential to be especially powerful for L2TL.
Context: The role of narrative

• Narrative is a means by which we create and transmit culture. We learn, teach, and communicate through narratives because they provide cognitive frameworks for learning new information.

• Game designers use narratives, which include characters, stories, and images, to contextualize game rules and structures. These narrative elements allow for goal orienting, afford interaction, and animate feedback mechanisms.

• The context-in-the-game is different from the context of play, which involves where, why, how, and with whom the game is played.

• Designed and personal narratives (that emerge from the context of play), can be used as resources for L2TL.
Motivation: Engagement and flow

- The process model of learning motivation views motivation as a dynamic and shifting process that involves choice and retrospection.
- Ultimately, the designer must create a game players want to start playing and keep playing.
- A sense of engagement emerges when players are invested and participating fully in a game. Well-designed systems of goal orientation, interaction, feedback, and context are key features of an engaging game. Engagement is a key prerequisite to a flow state.
- **Flow** is a fundamental concept for game design and player motivation. It focuses on the mental state of the player that emerges from a meaningful play experience. Researchers study the prerequisites to flow and the effects of flow. Language learning may be optimized when learners experience flow.
Endgame: The future of digital games and L2TL

Review of 3 premises

- Games are complex, integrated systems.
- Player and learner agency are key.
- Games promote learning to play, rather than playing to learn.

The Future of Digital Game-Mediated L2TL?

- More research! Focused research!
- Collaborations
- Renewed perspectives
- Measured expectations
- Increased diversity (of game types and genres)
- Open minds
- Critical play