

SPECIAL ISSUE COMMENTARY

DIGITAL GAME AND PLAY ACTIVITY IN L2 TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Games and play dynamics are proliferating in social, professional, and educational domains. This special issue brings together a collection of articles examining game and play activity in second language teaching and learning. Each addresses the topic from a unique perspective and represents game and play as part of complex ecologies of practice. The approaches include observation of out-of-school L2 gaming practices, adaptation of commercial, off-the-shelf games in the classroom, application of a game-based L2 learning environment, and the study of ‘gameful’ learning through play in social networks.

Keywords: Digital Games, Language Play, Second Language Learning, Game-Based Learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Games and play dynamics are being increasingly applied in social, professional, and educational domains. The globalization of the digital gaming industry, the diversification of games into new and culturally hybrid genres, a global increase in access to broadband, and increasing numbers of non-traditional game players have precipitated a notable expansion of digital game and play activity into new contexts and applications. These developments warrant consideration by practitioners and researchers for the potentials that digital games and play activity have for technology-enhanced L2TL.

This issue brings together a collection of articles examining digital game and play activity in L2TL. Each article approaches the topic from a different angle and represents digital games and play as elements of complex L2TL ecologies. Contexts range from the informal use of commercial, off-the-shelf games for autonomous language learning to the playful ‘spinning off’ of L2 learning in a Twitter-enhanced classroom. As such, this issue supports a broad interpretation of the notions of ‘game’ and ‘play’ and presents a variety of applications of digital games and playfulness to the learning and teaching of languages. Here, we briefly examine a framework for categorizing work in digital games and language learning (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2012) and then highlight ways in which each of the contributors have uniquely approached game and play dynamics. We conclude our commentary with a look towards the future.

A FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN DIGITAL GAMES

While the study of digital games and play in L2TL has a longer history than most realize (e.g. Hubbard, 1991; Phillips, 1987), the amount of work in the area has grown considerably in the last five years, as measured by new edited volumes (e.g. Reinders, 2012), special issues (e.g., Cornillie, Thorne, & Desmet, 2012; Thomas, 2011), and monographs (e.g. Peterson, 2013; Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012). In an effort to categorize this work, we have developed a framework for understanding L2TL research and practice involving digital games as game-enhanced, game-based, or game-informed (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2012;

Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012), roughly based on functional characteristics of the game under study. Each dimension seeks to answer distinct questions about learning and teaching (see Table 1).

Table 1. *A Framework for Examining Research and Practice in Digital Games.*

	Characteristics	L2 Learning Questions	L2 Teaching Questions
Game-enhanced	Use of vernacular, off-the-shelf games (i.e., games designed for entertainment purposes)	How does game-mediated L2 learning occur ‘in the wild’?	How can vernacular games be pedagogically-mediated for L2 learning and teaching?
Game-based	Use of educational or learning-purposed games (i.e., synthetic immersive environments)	How do specific game designs afford particular L2 learner behaviors?	How can game-based environments be designed to incorporate and/or complement L2 pedagogical uses?
Game-informed	Game and play principles applied in digital and non-digital contexts outside the confines of what one might typically consider a game	How can insights from the study of games and play inform our understanding of L2 learning?	How can insights from the study of games and play inform our understanding of L2 teaching and the design of all L2 learning environments?

Note. Adapted from Sykes & Reinhardt (2012, p. 33)

Game-enhanced research seeks to investigate how commercial games not purposed for learning (i.e. ‘vernacular’) can afford L2 learning and how those affordances might be realized in formal pedagogical environments. Game-based perspectives investigate the application of digital games that are explicitly designed for pedagogical purposes, and game-informed perspectives apply insights from the study of games and play to teaching and learning outside of traditional game spaces, that is, the phenomenon of ‘gamification’ (Kapp, 2012) or ‘gamefulness’ (McGonigal, 2013). While notable work has been done in each of these areas, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of game and play perspectives on L2 learning and teaching. Collectively, the articles in this special issue illustrate a breadth and depth of perspective, as well as parameters afforded by the framework.

Game-enhanced L2 learning and teaching

The use of commercial, off-the-shelf games for learning and teaching offer a number of potential benefits (e.g. Gee, 2007). In terms of learning, this includes the benefits of authenticity and learning community (e.g. Peterson, 2012), opportunity for intercultural learning (e.g. Thorne, 2008), access to diversity and complexity of written and spoken discourse (e.g., Thorne, Fischer, & Lu, 2012), and affordances for the socio-cognitive processes of learning and language socialization (e.g. Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio, 2009; Zheng, Young, Wagner, & Brewer, 2009), especially of lexis (e.g. deHaan, Reed, & Kuwada, 2010; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2012). Game-enhanced research shares the belief that by investigating how commercial digital games are used outside of class, and how they maybe adapted for learning purposes in class, we might enhance our understanding of L2 learning and transform our practice of L2 teaching.

In this issue, Alice Chik’s article *Digital gaming and language learning: Autonomy and community*, contributes to this strand of research through in-depth case studies of how, when, and with whom autonomous digital game-enhanced English and Japanese learning takes place outside of formal classroom contexts ‘in the wild’ of Hong Kong. In the piece, she examines data including gameplay session transcripts, stimulated recall interviews, focus group discussions, and online discussion forums to

explore the role of autonomy, community, and identity or role as related to second language learning. Patterns from case studies of ten learners indicate notable insights across five dimensions – location, formality, pedagogy, locus of control, and trajectory (Benson & Chik, 2011). The author reports on complex individual and social factors that facilitate (or hinder) game-enhanced L2 learning. The findings confirm previous work suggesting that game-enhanced learning outside of formal instructional contexts is a rich, but under-researched, phenomenon worth our attention. Chik's contribution adds to this work not only through examination of in-game discourses, but also through the ecologically valid and principled consideration of digital game-related socio-literacy practices outside of formal educational contexts. While Chik's previous research shows that some teachers are unaware of what their students are up to when they are playing games, this study shows that some students are engaging in productive, autonomous L2 learning activity.

In addition to the study of out-of-class, autonomous game-enhanced L2 learning, other researchers have recognized the educational potential of vernacular games and have forged ahead to exploit them as pedagogical resources. As cultural products, digital games are arguably authentic cultural texts (Squire, 2008; Reinhardt, 2013), and gaming is an authentic socio-literacy practice (Steinkuehler, 2007; Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). Bringing commercial digital games into the L2 classroom requires consideration of curriculum fit, learner (and teacher) attitudes, and appropriateness of content. Furthermore, just as novels, magazines, websites, and movies must be pedagogically mediated to maximize learning, so must digital games.

Hayo Reinders and Sorada Wattana add to game-enhanced pedagogy research by physically modifying a popular MMORPG, *Ragnarok Online*, and integrating it into an EFL curriculum in Thailand. In *The effects of digital game play on willingness to communicate*, the authors demonstrate ways in which gameplay can have an impact on learners' willingness to communicate or "readiness to enter into discourse," an important yet under-investigated learner affect. Two sets of questionnaires measuring willingness to communicate were administered to thirty Thai learners of English. Results show that while there was a reluctance to interact in the classroom and notable anxiety around speaking English, there was a statistically verifiable stronger willingness to communicate in the modified game space.

Game-based learning and teaching

Reinders and Wattana's study challenges the boundaries of our categories by re-purposing an existing game into a tool that matches specific learning objectives, and we intentionally ordered that study second to illustrate the relationship between game-enhanced and game-based research. While game-enhanced research usually operates under the assumption that learner engagement and coherence of experience are naturally afforded by game authenticity, and thus it might be risky to pedagogically mediate the game, game-based research acknowledges that the design of a game is key to learning, and games are clearly designed objects (see, for example, Sykes, 2013; Holden and Sykes, 2011).

In *L2 writing practice: Game enjoyment as a key to engagement*, Laura Varner and her colleagues show that assumptions about authenticity correlating to engagement are more complex than simple causation, and in fact, engagement and motivation are part of an interrelated suite of correlated constructs in research on games and learning. In their study, they explore how mini-games may be purposefully designed to teach writing strategies, and how L1 and L2 English participants perceive engagement and learning in them. Varner et al. collected daily self-reports of motivation, performance perceptions, and engagement as well as performance indicators for high school aged native English users and ESL learners as they interacted with a self-directed, partially game-based digital writing tutor called Writing Pal (W-Pal). Results illustrate the complex relationships between actual writing improvement, perception of engagement, challenge, and boredom, and they indicate a strong correlation between enjoyment of game-based learning and L2 learner engagement, suggesting the potential of designed game-based applications as tools for targeted L2 skills development.

Game- (and play-) informed learning and teaching

While its exact definition is debated to no end, a ‘game’ is generally understood to be a goal-oriented, rule-based, playful (and usually voluntary) activity (Caillois, 1961; McGonigal, 2013). Play is understood in human development and anthropology research to be fundamental to human ontogenesis (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978), and language play has been studied as fundamental to language learning (Cook, 2000; Lantolf, 1997). Interestingly, English distinguishes the word ‘game’ from ‘play,’ while other languages do not. When considering how the study of game-mediated social and cognitive activity might inform the design and practice of L2TL, it might seem logical to study the *ludic*, or rule-structured quality of gameplay, separately from the *paedic*, or playful quality of gameplay. However, in many senses they are inseparable, as implied by the very term ‘gameplay.’ On the other hand, having two words may help us see how we might think of ‘gamefulness’ (McGonigal, 2013) as a quality that can bring the transformative potential of play into the already goal-oriented and rule-based classroom. In this sense, ‘gameful,’ ‘gamified,’ or in our terms ‘game-informed’ environments acknowledge and integrate gameplay as a means of learning in contexts where it makes sense to do so. As with any game-mediated application, it is critical to remind ourselves that the mere implementation of game-informed practice does not, in and of itself ensure a positive outcome.

In our taxonomy, the purpose of game-informed research is to investigate how the activities of digital gaming and play in learning can inform L2TL that may not be embedded in traditional game structures. In other words, by studying these activities, we might better understand and design L2 learning environments, including tasks and assessments, to be more game-informed, even if they are not recognized as games. While there has been a solid and growing strand of research on language play in technology-enhanced environments (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Broner & Tarone, 2001; Liang, 2012; Warner, 2004), theoretically grounded descriptive work is still scant, especially with emerging technologies.

In the final article of this issue, *Microblogging activities: Tool transformation and language play*, author David Hattem contributes to the study of technology-mediated gamefulness by demonstrating how social networking tools in L2 educational contexts may be ‘spun off’ or repurposed by users through language play. Grounding his study in Bakhtinian and other socially-informed frameworks, he examines how three students found agency by subverting the formal goals of grammar-focused Twitter-based classroom activities, using the tool for their own purposes at the same time meeting curricular objectives. In other words, through collaboration, structure, and playfulness, the students gamified their grammar activity and, in doing so, built a learning community, resulting in ‘expansive learning.’ The study illustrates how a delicate balance between learner agency and curricular objective may be struck through gameplay.

CONCLUSION

The selections in this special issue represent the complexity and diversity of approach to the study of digital games and play in L2TL and aims to highlight key areas for further exploration in game-enhanced, game-based, and game-informed research and practice. As boundaries between the digital and physical world continue to blur, it is difficult to predict the ways in which technological behaviors and tools will transform one another. A transformation currently underway, and notably absent from this issue, is the way in which place and space are mediated by the presence (or absence) of mobile devices. With the almost ubiquitous existence of smart phones, we are seeing a remarkable shift in the ways in which people interact with the places they encounter (Squire, 2009). Moving language learning outside of the classroom and remediating learners’ experience with the local communities in which they interact is a logical, yet still relatively underexplored area (see Holden and Sykes, 2001; Sykes and Holden, 2012; and Thorne, 2013). Place-based digital games, among other types and genres, hold a great deal of promise as we move forward into a new frontier of persistent connection and geo-located information.

As access to a diversity of digital games expands to new populations, it is important to develop a keen understanding of how in-class and ‘in the wild’ gameplay, with both commercial and educational games, may impact socialization, collaboration, and language use. This understanding can inform pedagogies that enhance formal L2 learning experiences with authentic digital games, as well as inform the purposed and targeted design of game-based spaces specifically for L2TL. Finally, as we begin to experience *gamefulness* and *play* across everyday places (e.g., collecting points at a local coffee shop) and social activities (e.g., city scavenger hunts in teams), we must develop a critical awareness of the role of games and play in everyday and academic life. Our hope is that a pro-active, empirical approach to these phenomena not only deepens our theoretical understanding of L2TL, but also transforms practice and ultimately informs development. Otherwise, we may find ourselves doing only reactionary research in response to market forces which, due to the growing size of the global game industry, set the agenda for us.

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