Exploring the Potential of a Location Based Augmented Reality Game for Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper adds to the small but growing body of research into the potential of augmented reality games for teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It explores the extent to which such games enhance the language learning experience of advanced level EFL learners. The author draws on his work developing Mission not really Impossible, a location-based augmented reality game which uses the Aurasma mobile application to provide a series of challenging language tasks for advanced level learners as they move around the city of Karlsruhe in Germany. The game is evaluated through a mix of observation during gameplay and feedback from participants. Broad approval of the language challenges that had to be completed is evident and Aurasma proves itself to be user-friendly and reliable. The findings affirm the potential of augmented reality games to engage and challenge advanced level language learners.

KEYWORDS

Advanced Learners, Augmented Reality, Aurasma, English as a Foreign Language, English Teaching, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Location Based Augmented Reality Mobile Games, Mobile Games

INTRODUCTION

Teaching advanced level learners of English can often be challenging. Some learners feel they are not making much progress, (Appleby, 2011) or that their “highly specific individual requirements” (Maley, 2009, p. 3) are not being met. Others struggle for motivation after many years of regular English lessons but, at the same time, might not accept that they are in need of ‘remedial’ work. Advanced learners are, generally, experienced learners and teachers have to tread carefully. As White (1971, p. 231) warns, “some language exercises are usually regarded with antipathy if not downright hostility”.

Inspiration in terms of resources is sadly lacking. There is a great variety of published material for other levels but very little for advanced learners. Yet this is the level at which many employers expect their staff to be operating. This is particularly true in Germany where companies regularly switch to English during job interviews as a way of weeding out candidates with unsatisfactory language skills (Unicum, 2014).

Survey evidence (Maley, 2009) indicates a clear demand amongst advanced learners for something to take them beyond their current levels. Identifying that “something” is the nub of the problem. Given that the majority of the 55 English courses offered at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology’s Language Centre are at advanced level, the need for engaging materials is particularly acute.

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As Raybourn (2011) points out, games have been used for a number of years in such fields as military science and intercultural communication. More recently, much has been written about the benefits of educational games and how they provide an attractive form of learning (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2001; Kirriemuir & McFarlane, 2004). At the same time, there is growing interest in the use of mobile technology to create immersive gaming environments, which can also support conceptual and higher level cognition (Klopfer, 2008; Parsons et al., 2012). These games “on the move” appear to offer exactly the kind of challenging affordances advanced learners of English need.

It is often said that the best thing about games, and the main reason to use them in educational settings, is that they are fun (Lewis & Bedson, 1999; Lengeling & Malarcher, 1997; Kuhn, 2014). There is nothing essentially wrong with this. Games can reduce a learner’s affective filter and contribute to a relaxed atmosphere where they feel comfortable and therefore less worried about making mistakes (Richard-Amato, 1988). According to Silvers (1982), teachers often forget that in a relaxed atmosphere, real learning takes place and students use the language they have been exposed to and have practised earlier.

In her wide-ranging study into the use of games and simulations for supporting learning, De Freitas (2006) discovered that the majority of experts (educationalists, industry trainers, academics and tutors) she interviewed thought that games and simulations significantly improved learner motivation, particularly amongst young people. Moreover, games promote skills such as persistence, creativity and resilience (McGonigal, 2011) as well as encouraging the development of problem solving techniques (Gee, 2008). With regard to language learning, Lengeling and Malarcher (1997) highlight the fact that games encourage more creative, spontaneous use of language, thus improving communicative competence and building class cohesion. After all, how many language classes fail to begin with some kind of ice-breaker game?

This is not to say that games should be relegated to a peripheral space at the beginning of a lesson or at the end to kill time. On the contrary, they can actually form a key part of the language learning process as they encourage active use of the target language instead of a focus on grammatical accuracy (Lee, 1979). This is exactly the kind of focus recommended for advanced learners by White (1971), Appleby (2011) and Maley (2009).

According to Klopfer (2012), the combination of game and mobile device has the potential to be transformative. Their unique affordances of portability, social interactivity, context sensitivity, connectivity and individuality make mobile devices highly viable as a tool for facilitating learning. Furthermore, they are ubiquitous and with most users already familiar with how to operate them, little special training is required.

It is perhaps surprising then that their integration into teaching and learning has been relatively slow and that models for using and developing mobile applications in education are somewhat lacking (Naismith et al., 2004). Where Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is exploited, it seems that it is still mostly used to present information rather than accommodate interaction through, for example, games. Instead of facilitating a “more holistic learner engagement with space” (Driver, 2012, p. 8), language teachers have typically repurposed traditional forms of content for mobile devices: lecture podcasts, mobile flashcards, mobile glossaries and grammar drilling (Godwin-Jones, 2008). In their study, Hulme and Shield (2008) found little evidence of MALL involving oral communication or collaboration and concluded that mobility and portability were not fully exploited in the design of MALL activities. Ironically, it is these unique affordances which, according to actually justify the use of mobile devices at all.

Perhaps there is a lack of awareness amongst educators involved in language teaching of the “new vistas for language learning” (Godwin-Jones, 2008, p. 8) that mobile devices create. Lack of confidence in facilitating the use of mobile devices in a classroom setting is another problem. This article attempts
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