Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: Comparing the Experiences of Adult Foreign Language Learners with Off-the-Shelf and Specialized Games for Learning German

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ABSTRACT

Learning opportunities offered by digital games have become an important research topic in recent years. Language learning is one of the areas in which games could prosper but the question then is whether these should be specialized language-learning games or commercial off-the-shelf games for entertainment. The goal of this paper is to compare the experiences evoked by playing a commercial and two language-learning games in adult foreign language learners (N=62). While results of the experimental design suggest that a commercial game results in better playing and learning experiences, these findings are partly neutralized by the attitude of the participants towards learning through digital games and by being a frequent player of games or not. This raises questions as to how digital games should be designed to appeal to a public of learners that is not familiar with digital game-based learning or with gaming in general.

Keywords: Attitude, Commercial Games, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Foreign Language Learning, Game-Based Learning, Game Experience, Learning, Serious Games

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INTRODUCTION

Using digital games for educational instruction has rapidly gained importance in theory and practice over the past decade. A recurring question in this research field and in the field of computer assisted language learning (CALL) focuses on what kind of games to use: existing commercial games or special-purpose educational ones (see e.g., De Grove, Bourgonjon, & Van Looy, 2012; Squire, 2004; Van Eck, 2006). The former generally boast significantly larger budgets permitting to invest more in the quality of the playing experience whereas the latter are more directly aimed at attaining predefined learning outcomes (Michael & Chen, 2006). Despite the debate on this topic, insights gained from a user-centric perspective are largely absent (Looi, See, Iris, & Aria, 2011). Moreover, when a user-centric perspective is employed, it accounts for learning styles and players’ personalities yet it often fails to consider significant differences between players’ proficiency (for user-profiling in game, see: Kickmeier & Albert, 2010; Bateman & Boon, 2006). Therefore, the aim of this study is to measure and compare how adult foreign language learners experience playing two foreign language learning games and one non-educational commercial game in a foreign language. The article starts with a brief overview of existing literature on game and learning experiences, attitude and the impact of external stimuli. Next, the article reports on the empirical exploration of the playing and learning experiences evoked by playing the three games.

LITERATURE

Game Experience We notice a significant interest in the concept of game experience in the study of digital games. These studies display a broad spectrum of research objectives ranging from constructing a scale to measure game experiences (IJsselsteijn, de Kort, Poels, Jurgelionis, & Bellotti, 2007) to defining and uncovering different dimensions and determinants of enjoyment (Klimmt, 2003; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). Other scholars have investigated how different aspects related to playing games might affect the game experience. For instance, the relation between game experience and the social context (De Kort & IJsselsteijn, 2008; Gajadhar, de Kort, & IJsselsteijn, 2008a, Mäyrä, 2007), the effect of performance on enjoyment (Klimmt, Blake, Hefner, Vorderer, & Roth, 2009; Trepte & Reinecke, 2011) or the relation between identification and game experience (Hefner, Klimmt, & Vorderer, 2007; Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009). Despite the complex nature of experiences most of the aforementioned studies converge on game experience as that which evokes or inhibits enjoyment when playing games. A regularly used concept for explaining what makes an activity enjoyable is ‘flow’. Flow refers to an intrinsically motivating experience stemming from an activity in which one is fully absorbed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Such an activity is characterized by a balance between challenge and skill, the merging of action and awareness, clear goals and feedback, concentration on the task at hand, control, a loss of self-consciousness and the transformation of time. As noted by Sweetser and Wyeth (2005) these elements strikingly fit the activity of playing digital games. Thus, it is not surprising that flow or flow-related elements have been used regularly to analyze game experience. While flow elements are recurring concepts in experience research, academic inquiry on the topic is not limited to these experiences. Klimmt et al. (2007) explored the effect of control and effectance on enjoyment and found effectance to be an important underlying factor in evoking game enjoyment. Combining flow theory with the technology acceptance model, Holsapple and Wu (2006) explored the antecedents and effects of flow in online gaming. Nacke and Lindley (2008) measured how adjusting the difficulty of a level in Half-life 2 (Valve Corporation, 2004) influenced several experience dimensions and found that challenge and tension differed significantly between sessions. Using the same Game Experience Questionnaire.
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