

[Book Review]

Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development, and Implementation

Jeremy White (whitejeremy@gmail.com)
Ritsumeikan University, Japan

Title	Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development, and Implementation
Author	Edited by Peterson, M., Yamazaki, K., & Thomas, M.
Publication year	2021
Publisher	Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
Type of product	Book
Pages	284
Price	Kindle \$129.80, Hardcover \$133.74

Introduction

The book titled *Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development and Implementation* presents a collection of research to create a better understanding of the impact digital games are having on contemporary computer-assisted language learning (CALL). The editors of this book suggest that the collection of papers presented enables both researchers and practitioners to stay up to date with the changes occurring in the field. Research in the field of digital games and CALL has been expanding in recent years (Reinhardt 2017; Hung et al. 2018; Peterson et al. 2020), but there are still many gaps in the literature and also issues in the field that a book such as this should be attempting to fill. This book goes some way in doing that by providing a timely boost to several areas of CALL and digital games for language learning. The authors have assembled a range of well-known international scholars, including Coleman, deHaan, and Reinhardt, as well as many more up-and-coming scholars from around the world. This book would make a good starting point for those wishing to become involved in the field, as well as scholars and practitioners wanting to consider the theory and future direction of digital games and language learning.

This 12-chapter book is divided into three parts and includes an introductory chapter by the editors. Part one of this book presents works highlighting theory and research concerning gamification and digital games in foreign language learning. Chapters in part two discuss the development and implementation of digital games in CALL, while chapters in part three investigate the future of game-based language learning. The three parts of the book will now be reviewed in more detail.

Part one – Theory and research

Part one of this book contains four chapters that highlight theory and research in relation to gamification and digital games in foreign language learning. The initial chapter in part one

is written by Benini and Thomas. It is strategically placed and examines research related to the application of gamification and digital games in foreign and second language learning in recent years (2014-2020). This chapter highlights that the volume of research in this field continues to increase at a rapid pace. In addition, the variety of games, the methodology employed, the context of the research, and that many positive findings concerning the affordances of digital games have been indicated by this recent body of literature. However, even with these increases, the lack of empirical research and many of the challenges of digital games research remain unchanged. Chapter three (Jabbari) follows a similar theme with massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), suggesting that MMOGs can draw interest from second language acquisition (SLA) scholars, who, within the current body of literature, have reported many encouraging findings, especially concerning L2 (second language) learning and socialization. However, the theoretical framework of these studies needs to be more substantial. This chapter then provided several examples of how a broader range of fields of inquiry such as linguistics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology could assist in helping this field evolve from the narrow theoretical base it currently occupies.

Chapters four (Reinhardt) and five (Coleman) follow a similar theme, with chapter four highlighting the need for researchers to consider a design-informed research approach to digital game and language learning research. This chapter presents the need for researchers to consider pedagogical mediation when using massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) and to critically examine whether the game is appropriate for use at all. Reinhardt states that there is a need to gain a certain level of game design literacy within the digital game-based language learning field. Chapter five focused on a discussion of the weaknesses of simulation-gaming (sim-gaming) research by focusing on the construct of realism in sim-games through human linguistics (HL). As with the previous three chapters in part one, this chapter outlines the need for a more rigorous theoretical framework to analyze digital game studies.

Part one of this book presents theory and research about gamification and digital games in foreign language learning. What is clear from the four chapters that make up part one is that the field suffers from a lack of theoretical vigor, which needs to be addressed by digital games and language learning scholars.

Part two – Development and implementation of digital games in computer-assisted language learning

Part two of this book emphasized the development and implementation of digital games in CALL. This was the most significant section of the book, with five chapters focused on both the formal and informal contexts of digital game application and development. Part two contained studies that investigated learner-based projects with serious games designed for language learning purposes and off-the-shelf (COTS). After reading part one of the book, part two gives the reader a chance to consider how the ideas of part one apply to the studies in part two. It was encouraging to see the range of digital game studies incorporated into this section. Chapter six (Bacalja and Euphemia Clark) outlined case study research from Australia that asked the reader to reconsider how text is brought into the classroom using two contrasting methods as an example. The second chapter in part two (Harbord, Dempster, and Jayemanne) came from Scotland. This study reported on a learner-based project of a purposed built role-playing game (RPG) to investigate the role of this type of game in facilitating SLA, with the addition of a pilot study into the effects of avatar choice on perceptions of learning for Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. The authors concluded that the utilization of

avatars created more opportunities for SLA as they allowed for greater immersion and lower inhibitions.

Chapters eight (Yonemoto) and nine (Mills and Thanyawatpokin) were both authored in Japan. However, the focus of these studies was very different. Chapter eight presented case study research that focused on a gamified AR study included in a sixteen-week beginner level Japanese course that focused on disaster preparedness of Japanese speakers. This study reported some positive results, including the students' ability to use the target language (TL) in a meaningful context while actively participating in disaster preparedness. In chapter nine, the second of the Japan-based studies, survey research was conducted in four sections (1) twenty-first-century skills, (2) digital game perceptions, (3) digital game usage, and (4) demographics. Through this survey, the authors explored the link between extramural gameplay and student self-reported 21st-century literacy skills to provide greater insight into how out-of-class technology usage can impact in-class teaching. The authors drew several significant findings from their research, including that if Japanese students can attain some competency in 21st-century skills outside of the class by playing games, this would prove beneficial for the in-class context.

The final chapter in part two (Sylvén) continued the international theme of this book with research-based in Sweden. For the third time in part two, we see an example of case study research. The case study focused on a single subject—a young learner of English—and the research itself relates to how the subject's informal contact with English through digital games and other means has contributed to his L2 ability. The data in this study was collected via interviews and tests such as the Young Learner Vocabulary Assessment Test (YLVAT), the yes/no test, and the English Reading Comprehension Test. Results of this study indicated that the subject, given his age, was able to obtain a relatively high level of L2 English proficiency through his informal contact with English in games and other media.

Part two of this book has provided the reader with a varied array of research and presents opportunities for the reader to consider how their research would fit into the studies presented. Even though three of the five studies in this section used case studies, the methodologies of analysis, the location, and the research subjects were varied enough to maintain the interest of the reader.

Part three – Towards the future of game-based language learning

Part three of this book presents arguably ideas that need the most consideration in this field. As previously highlighted in section one, there is a need for a clear theoretical framework in digital games and language learning studies. This section goes further to investigate the classroom applications of digital games research, the role of the teacher, and the pedagogical aspects of the implementation of digital games in language education. In chapter eleven (Thanyawatpokin and York), the authors attempt to put a clear line between game-based language learning (GBLL) and what they would like to propose as game-based language teaching (GBLT). The authors suggest that while GBLL uses games as content without additional teacher mediation, GBLT is formal, pedagogically sound, teacher-mediated use of games. The researchers imply that studies to date have focused on learning and provide valuable content for the role of digital games in language learning. However, the role of the teacher has, in general, been neglected. The authors of this paper make many very valid claims and give the reader a lot to consider regarding their research activities. The final chapter gives a first-person perspective from deHann. This paper again highlights some of the issues with the field of GBLL and critically analyses 29 studies based on 14 questions related to theory, practice, and research. The chapter discusses whether GBLT is vaporware, that is, will the

concept become normalized in the classroom. The author suggests that crunch time is upon GBLT and that it is time to put the teacher back into the equation when designing and implementing digital game studies.

When considering the two chapters of part three, the reader is left to feel that they need to reevaluate their own research practices. At the same time, the reader can feel a sense of positivity that the field of digital games and language learning is in such a dynamic phase that it can openly critique itself with the sole goal of improving the field.

Conclusion

The publication of this book comes at a critical time for digital game and language learning. The book has highlighted that while the field is now well established, there is still a need for more research into the theory of language learning and digital games. The overall feeling the reader gets from this book is that the field of digital games and language learning is at a crossroads. For this field to grow, scholars need to spend more time considering the theory that influences their research and exploring new theories from other fields that could be of benefit. The studies in part two show that the use and study of game-based learning is international and has the potential to grow further using a variety of contexts. Part three asks the reader to reflect on their own research, move away from single exploratory studies, and reevaluate the teacher's role in GBLT/GBL studies. In all, this book encouragingly differs from others. In this book, the authors have not just focused on the positives of the field but have been able to reflect on themselves critically. Such reflection can only be a good thing and will go some way in creating a more robust field of study. This book should find an audience with novice researchers and veterans alike.

References

- Hung, H. T., Yang, J. C., Hwang, G. J., Chu, H. C., & Wang, C. C. (2018). A scoping review of research on digital game-based language learning. *Computers & Education, 126*, 89-104.
- Peterson, M., White, J., Mirzaei, M. S., & Wang, Q. (2020). A review of research on the application of digital games in foreign language education. *New technological applications for foreign and second language learning and teaching*, 69-92
- Reinhardt, J. (2017). Digital gaming in L2 teaching and learning. *The handbook of technology and second language teaching and learning*, 202-216.