

How Videogames Can Help us Achieve Lifelong Learning of Language

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Abstract

In the last few years - riding the wave of the new born academic branch of game studies , the educational use of ITC and social virtual worlds - the study of videogames as "learning tools" recently has become quite popular. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for the specific studies on their use as tools for learning (foreign) language. Nevertheless, videogames are authentic and complex materials that can offer through the gaming experience different kinds of linguistic inputs in interactive contexts and situations.

Even if the videogames originally were created for educational purposes (very popular in the '80 and '90s and formally known as edutainment) often fell short in creating a real competence (of language) and became nothing more than an automatic "driller" of lexicalized units, it is true too that videogames are rapidly turning into bottom-top medium for games, and also languages.

In the last ten years videogames have grown considerably but the doubt if they are "old" enough to enter the classroom remains. As language teachers we are trained to use both video (and audio) materials and games (such as role-play and role-taking games) in the classroom but videogames are a totally different thing and not a simple conjugation of the two.

This because the computer game shifts the player in a different simulated/emulated reality that could dramatically collide with the classroom's one. Contrarily, in a non-formal or mediated context, that very same virtual reality could become like a safe haven where the student/player can freely enjoy the possibilities of the language. Words and sentences become useful tools that must be used to solve tasks, triggering experiences and creating cognitive frames. From this point of view the potential of computer games is enormous and, unfortunately, almost totally unexplored and unexploited.

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of how and why videogames can (and should) be used in language classes.