

Chapter 2

Using MMORPGs in Classrooms: Stories vs. Teachers as Sources of Motivation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case deals with the problem of decision making in allocating resources during an educational game-development process. In educational games, unlike commercial games, there is an added focus on creating learning content, shifting the balance between learning and fun to a degree where essential game elements might be excluded from these games. In some cases, classroom settings, however, are filled with elements that can emulate the role of a missing element. As it was seen in this case, even when some important game elements (i.e., narratives) were missing from a game, the presence of some important classroom elements (i.e., teachers) helped replace them.

OVERALL DESCRIPTION

Although games as educational tools have received a significant amount of scholarly endorsement over the past years (Barab, Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010; Gee, 2003; Squire, 2005; Takatalo, Hakkinen, Kaistinen, & Nyman, 2010), the usage of these tools in traditional classroom settings is still rare. One reason for this rare us-

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age stems from the difficulty of either finding a commercially available game that covers the curricular goals, or developing a game for the specific learning goals at hand. Evidently, the second option is often more costly. Even when the support is found to create such games, the design of these games is often challenging in that they are not being played in a “traditional” manner and the elements that work in commercial games might not work in classroom settings. In this case study, I describe how some existing classroom factors can substitute or modify the effects of very important game elements. Specifically, I will explain how virtual teachers can keep the students engaged, even when a very important element of role-playing games, narratives, is missing from a game, and hence, make the case for the particularity of playing games in a classroom setting.

Compared to playing games at home, when students play educational games in class, there often is a mentor, who is in or outside the virtual world, watching and constraining game experience of the students. Additionally, because during development of educational games teaching certain learning goals gains importance, the developed games may not have some core game elements due to the choices made in apportioning of resources. In this case study, to inform educational game developers and to see the effect of in-game virtual teachers in a Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG), a quasi-experimental study was conducted to see how episodic narratives and the presence of teachers compare in terms of making students feel engaged. In the results of the study, it was seen that the students (n=19) felt engaged by the presence of a teacher, or narratives equally. In a careful analysis, it was seen that the reason why the students felt engaged in either situation (teacher or narrative) was due to the fact that in both situations they were working on specific goals given by either their virtual teachers or the episodic narratives, making them feel analogously engaged. This finding carries great importance in both usage of games in classrooms and designing educational games, as will be depicted later in this chapter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Among many game types available, MMORPGs stand out as ideal candidates for language learning for their potential to solve some of the very important challenges to foreign language education: “the lack of the resources, milieu, and incentives to learn and use the target language for real purposes” (Zhao & Lai, 2008, p. 407). Perhaps, one of the most important potential of MMORPGs in language learning is their ability to provide meaningful and authentic contexts for communication and language use, because by definition MMORPGs are played with many other

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