Chapter 4
Beyond Hidden Bodies and Lost Pigs:
Student Perceptions of Foreign Language Learning with Interactive Fiction

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interactive Fiction is a text-based genre of video game which blends participatory storytelling, the exploration of virtual worlds, and logical puzzle-solving. As it is a form of electronic literature as well as a form of video game, and it is compatible with the principles of second language acquisition, it can be used for digital game-based language learning. This chapter presents a case study on the perceptions of learners of English as a foreign language on the use of Interactive Fiction to practise language skills, particularly as a means of improving reading for fluency. The games played by the learners were 9:05 and Lost Pig, and the results produced by the study provided positive evidence towards the use of Interactive Fiction as an engaging language learning tool.

OVERALL DESCRIPTION

Interest in digital game-based learning (DGBL) from researchers and educators has continued to grow and works such as Gee (2007a), Baek (2010), and Whitton (2010), make a strong case for the potential of video games for learning and how they may be implemented in the classroom. Recent publications on using DGBL for foreign language learning, particularly by De Hann (2005), Purushtoma, Thorne & Wheatley (2009), Reinders & Wattana (2011) and Mawer & Stanley (2011), have shown that despite the existence of challenges, the affordances of video games are in line with modern approaches to language learning pedagogy and are worthy of consideration for classroom application. This case study looks at how the retro video game genre of Interactive Fiction (IF), also known as text-adventures, was used with learners of English as a foreign language in order to provide them with an alternative method of practising reading for fluency in a meaningful, motivating and engaging manner. The research question that guided the study was: "Do learners perceive IF as an engaging way to practise English skills?"

Background Information

The case study took place at the British Council, a private language institute in Porto, Portugal. The sample consisted of a monolingual class made up of six males and four females, between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. The students were at an upper-intermediate level of English and were preparing to do the Cambridge ESOL First Certificate Exam (FCE). As is often the case with exam preparation courses, the actual level of the language proficiency of the students was mixed, with some excellent students in the class and others that would have difficulty in achieving a passing grade on the FCE exam. However, they were for the most part very motivated and interested students based on their attitudes and work in the classroom. Being affluent, a questionnaire given after the gaming session confirmed that all of the students had Internet access at home and owned between three and five computers. Additionally, all but one of the students claimed to own at least one gaming console and every student claimed to own either one or two mobile gaming devices (with the Sony PSP and Nintendo DS being the most cited). It is therefore not surprising that all of the students said that they played video games at home. In comparison, only six of the learners admitted to enjoying reading for pleasure, and only in their native tongue of Portuguese.

The British Council is a well-respected English language-learning organisation with teaching centres in over 100 countries. It caters mostly to learners (children and adults) of upper-class families, who wish to improve their level of English for personal, academic or professional reasons, as well as to prepare for Cambridge

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