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Review of *Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development and Implementation*



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Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development and Implementation edited by Mark Peterson, Kasumi Yamazaki, Michael Thomas, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 288pp., £26.09 (Paperback) £68.40 (eBook). ISBN 9781350133013.

Undeniably, the blooming digital generation and the exponential growth in the number of gamers have rekindled the interest in examining the impact of digital games in contemporary computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Although this area of research has dramatically proliferated in recent years, Mark Peterson, Kasumi Yamazaki, and Michael Thomas believe that publications in this area are considerably limited and narrow. Since it is a relatively new research area, it is reasonable to claim that there is no single publication so far that can give a complete account of the field of CALL. As such, this book resonates with the call for putting related unpublished cutting-edge work together and offering wide-ranging perspectives across different countries and in a variety of contexts. In fact, the editors' aims are that this book may bring readers to broader viewpoints and help generate significant innovative insights regarding the use of digital games in language learning (DGLL) education.

In line with the editors' aims, the book title: "Digital Games and Language Learning: Theory, Development and Implementation" gives clues to readers for a comprehensive overview. Apparently, the book title is comparable to another recently published book (e.g., Reinhardt, 2019). It clearly points readers to the most fundamental aspects central to CALL's current research and development, which is more than just the "gameful" disposition for language learning and teaching. Although the book title dismisses the word "Teaching", the book's contents are all-inclusive, highlighting most aspects of DGLL, including the pedagogical implications. Perhaps, the editors intend to approach this research area holistically to encourage potential collaboration among researchers and practitioners. Concerning

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the outline for the book contents, the editors first highlight several motivations in selecting the book contributions and provide a brief overview of each twelve chapters (Chapter 1). And then, the editors systematically divide the remaining eleven chapters into three main sections (e.g., Parts 1–3) following the subareas in this sequence: theory and research (Part 1, Chapters 2–5), development and implementation (Part 2, Chapters 6–10) and future development (Part 3, Chapters 11–12).

With reference to the first motivation, the book provides a critical contemporary high-quality scholarship review of the field. In Chapter 1, Peterson, Thomas, and Yamazaki provide reports on findings of recent work based on various countries, first language backgrounds, and different institutional and out-of-class contexts. In Chapter 2, Benini and Thomas also give a comprehensive research review of work concerning gamification and digital games in second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) learning conducted over a period from 2014 to 2020. The authors highlight that the research conducted is wide-ranging as it has covered a variety of game types, methodologies, and contexts. Although there are positive findings supporting the affordances of DGLL in enhancing learner effective factors (e.g., motivation), the authors stress that empirical research in this area remains scarce, and the incorporation of digital games and game elements in language education is not without cultural and identity challenges.

Part 1 is comprised of chapters that deal with theory-informed research rationales for using digital games in CALL. Studies as such are deemed paramount as they are still lagging behind (Poole & Clarke-Midura, 2020). As established in Chapter 2, this book has set out a theoretically informed overview context for other chapters (e.g., Chapters 3–5) to explore the theoretical issues derived from the application of digital games in L2 and FL education. Particularly, in Chapter 3, Jabbari identifies that a significant number of research in this area lacks a substantive base in relation to language learning theories. In order to propose a comprehensive and credible rationale for the use of massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMOGs) in teaching and learning, Jabbari draws from relevant interactionist and sociocultural theories from SLA research.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the fundamental theoretical issues raised from the use of DGLL. In Chapter 4, Reinhardt opposes the possible overgeneralising claims made from the existing literature, specifically about the advantages of engaging learners in MMOGs. This chapter aims to make a call arguing for a design-informed and ecological influence approach, taking into account the variable of specific game design, context, as well as player behaviour to the evaluation of L2 learning in MMOGs. In Chapter 5, Coleman identifies another important theoretical issue with the evaluation of language learning with simulation games. The author argues that much of the research on the use of game types lacks a rigorous formal framework for analysis and that this is hindering the development of the field. Coleman further asserts that human linguistics serves as a basis for rigorous future research and development work in this area.

Proceeding to the second motivation, this book shifts its focus to providing recent cutting-edge learner-based research. In Part 2 of the book, Chapters 6 through 10 investigate the development and application of digital games in a variety of both formal and informal contexts, particularly the application in learner-based projects of both commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) games and serious games designed to assist in language learning. For example, in Chapter 6, Bacalja and Clark report on the use of digital games as texts in two learner-based case studies. The first study involved using the digital games in combination with traditional texts as part of a unit of study, whereas the second explored the use of digital games that facilitate experiential reading. The findings of the two studies inform readers how both games provided a valuable classroom learning experience.

This book also advocates significant justifications for using digital games in FL learning. For instance, in Chapter 7, Harbord, Dempster, and Jayemanne draw on relevant SLA research to provide a rationale for using the avatars in digital role-playing games (PRGs) in CALL. Similarly, in Chapter 8, Yonemoto reports on a case study of gamification that utilises augmented reality technology conducted on learners in a beginner-level Japanese as an FL course. Data analysis from learner feedback and researcher field notes show positive support that the use of game- and place-based AR activities improved participants' production of target language vocabulary.

The last two chapters in Part 2 concern under-researched area in the literature on DGLL in informal or out-of-school contexts. In Chapter 9, Mills and Thanyawatpokin conducted a large-scale survey involving two universities in Japan. The authors examine the relationship between extramural digital gameplay and twenty-first-century skills in the language classroom in this survey. Although the findings revealed a low correlation relationship, the majority of the participants somehow regard digital games as a learning tool. In chapter 10, Sylven presents the findings of a case study that investigated the effects of participation in out-of-school gaming on the language development of a Swedish adolescent. This longitudinal research reports that the participants made remarkable progress in developing their L2 proficiency through playing digital games and watching game commentary videos over several years.

For the third motivation, the book provides a holistic and balanced view by including the significant role of teachers and the pedagogical aspects of the implementation of DGLL education. The chapters in Part 3 of this book explore the current conditions of game-based language learning (GBLL) and set out an agenda for future research and development work. In Chapter 11, York and Thanyawatpokin examine the literature on the application of DGLL and identify a number of important issues with the current work. They also note an over-emphasis on exploratory studies that fail to provide a basis for actual classroom application. Hence, the authors propose a future research agenda that focuses on empirical work investigating teacher roles in enhancing GBLL. In Chapter 12, deHaan critiques the literature on the use of DGLL, giving advice on moving forward to have sustained and meaningful progress, where researchers need to work hand-in-hand with practitioners in the field. The author also argues that for GBLL to become fully normalised in language classrooms, there is a pressing need to redirect work on pedagogy-first game-based language teaching where the teacher plays a central role in facilitating optimal learning outcomes. As supported by Sykes (2018), any innovative design, implementation, and evaluation of digital games ought to put pedagogy at the forefront to create meaningful research and language learning experiences.

Since there is no single published work that has considered all developmental aspects of the use of DGLL in CALL, it is definitely a much-needed resource that integrates relevant theory, research, development, and implementation, as well as future development of the field. The depth of the discussion in the book leads me to believe that it is recommended for more experienced educators, developers, and researchers who have had exposure to DGLL, and would like to gain innovative insights on the potential use of DGLL.

It may be considered a useful companion to Reinhardt's (2019) book, and it is an essential resource for those interested in knowing how to incorporate digital games into learning and teaching. Whereas Reinhardt's (2019) book is more suitable for novice educators and researchers, equipping readers with the nuts and bolts and relevant theories for games before approaching the research ideas, designs and practice, the editors of the current book have made a great effort to fill the gap by drawing the contemporary cutting-edge scholarship from wide-ranging perspectives. This book is indispensable in that it not only serves as a valuable guide to information about the current existing work, but it also can act as a stimulus to provide valuable insights to generate new possibilities of DGLL for future classroom projects and research.

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