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GAME ON!

USING COMPUTER GAMES TO TEACH WRITING

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This short article looks at ways of using computer games to teach different aspects of writing in the foreign language classroom. It offers a number of practical tips for use in the language classroom and beyond.

Why games for the teaching of writing?

Most written communication now takes place electronically. This is having a significant effect on the types of writing our students produce. Prensky (2003) estimates that by the age of 21, learners have sent 250.000 instant messages and emails. Clearly, our students love to communicate through writing! Of course, our job is to improve the quality of that writing and to expand their written communication to include different text types. To me, one obvious starting point is the writing my students do for fun and to build on that in class. For this reason I have used text messaging and Facebook to encourage social writing. Especially videogames also offer a lot of potential to motivate students to write a wide range of text types. Considering that by Prensky's estimates, by the age of

21, the average student has spent about 10,000 hours playing videogames, there is ample opportunity for teachers to link classroom learning with out-of-class activities.

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the pedagogical benefits of computer games. James Paul Gee, for example, has identified 36 learning principles that he found to be present in many of the games he investigated. To give just two examples of these, take the 'Active, Critical Learning Principle'. This stipulates that 'All aspects of the learning environment (including the ways in which the semiotic domain is designed and presented) are set up to encourage active and critical, not passive, learning.' (Gee, 2003). In other words, computer games *engage* learners and get them involved in the tasks at hand. A second principle is the 'Regime of Competence Principle' where 'the learner gets ample opportunity to operate within, but at the outer edge of, his or her resources, so that at those points things are felt as challenging but not "undoable." (idem). You may recognise this as being similar to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. If you have ever played a computer game yourself you will have noticed that if you fail a task, the game adapts to your level until you do succeed. Similarly, if you succeed too quickly or too easily, new challenges appear. Computers are good at providing this type of adaptive environment. Surely these are principles many of us strive to implement ourselves in the classroom.

Games in general also have a number of characteristics that make them potentially useful for the teaching of writing. According to Prensky (2001) games share:

- 1) rules
- 2) goals and objectives
- 3) outcome and feedback

- 4) conflict, competition, challenge, and opposition
- 5) interaction
- 6) the representation of a story.

These elements are similar to those in the writing process where the interaction is usually defined by shared rules and where successful writers have clear goals in the communication they engage in. The representation of a story or the resolution of a conflict generally results in some type of response; a form of feedback. Teachers can use these parallels to draw on in the teaching of writing.

Practical ideas

Below I will briefly discuss seven ideas for the teaching of writing using the computer. Most of these do not require more than basic computer skills on your and your students' part.

Use games to investigate characters and story lines

One of the easiest options is to ask students to investigate the characters in the games they play and to identify the story lines in them. Many games have extremely extensive plots and subplots. Johnson (2005) discusses how in recent years popular media has become more complex and gives examples such as TV programmes and also computer games where multiple characters and storylines intertwine, in some cases running to 200 pages or more when written up. Clearly, there is a lot to say about computer games. Here is an example of the plot of one, now older, game (description taken from Wikipedia):

'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream' is a computer adventure game based upon Harlan Ellison's short story of the same name. It is about an evil computer named AM that has destroyed all of humanity except for five people he has been keeping alive and torturing for the past 109 years. Each survivor has a fatal flaw in his or her character, and in an attempt to crush their spirits, AM has constructed a metaphorical adventure for each that preys upon their weaknesses. To succeed in the game, the player must make ethical choices to prove to the evil computer that humans are better than machines, because they have the ability to redeem themselves.

Asking students to identify how such a story unfolds, who the characters are and how they relate to other characters and develop in the story, is a good way to focus their attention on the underlying principles both writers and game developers use to develop their stories. You will probably find that your learners have a lot to tell about the games they play!

Using your learners' online characters

Another option involving little or no technical skills on your part is to ask students to describe their online characters; most games, and especially online environments like Second Life (which has the advantage that its basic membership is free), let you 'create' your own character. This involves choosing your gender, race, fashion, but also your behaviour (will you play the good or the bad character?). Ask your students to read the descriptions of each others' characters or let students show the characters in class using projector or on a printout and then ask them to discuss their choices. A fun activity could be to shuffle the printouts of the different characters and hand them out. Students then have to guess which character belongs to whom (but be careful this doesn't get out of hand as it can get very personal). In the example in the previous section, you could ask

the students to explain their 'ethical choices'. Why did they do what they did? How did this affect the other characters in the game? With hindsight, would they have done things differently? Similarly, you could ask students to discuss the right or wrong of violent computer games and the characters' actions in them. A popular game such as Grand Theft Auto IV would be a good candidate for this.

Another good game to use for this purpose is the world's most popular game, The Sims (www.thesims.com), but unlike Second Life, this is not free. An alternative to Second Life is Active Worlds (www.activeworlds.com), which offers lower prices for educational institutions through its 'Active Worlds Educational Universe' or Moove, which is free (www.moove.com).

Use screenshots for discussion.

A screenshot is simply a picture of whatever is showing on your computer screen. Every computer keyboard has a key labelled 'Prt Sc', usually near the top right-hand side of the keyboard. Press this and then open a word processor. Right-click and choose 'paste'. You will now see your screenshot. You can use such screenshots as a starting point for a discussion in class. An ambiguous image is best (is the character trying to help the victim or will he abandon him?). If you do not have access to games yourself, ask your students to bring their own screenshots. Then ask your students to describe the scene and predict what will happen next and why. You could ask them to write out a possible dialogue. Another use for screenshots is to ask students to summarise a computer game with the help of a number of screenshots from key moments in the game. I have found that especially with reluctant writers the use of the visuals makes it easier for them to get started.

Get playing!

Some games are more language-rich than others. Educational games are specifically designed for use in the classroom but often students do not find them as interesting as non-educational games. Some non-educational games are particularly suited to language learning. An interesting example is *Ace Attorney* (cf. Stanly and Mawer 2008). This is about a young lawyer who investigates crime and prosecutes offenders. Successful players build a strong case and strategise to find and then deliver the strongest arguments. Students could play this game and write out their choices, their arguments and eventually the whole case. Different teams could play each other, both on the computer and offline, in writing. Social games like *Second Life* and *The Sims* mentioned above also involve a lot of opportunities for communication. Numerous smaller games exist that can be useful too. An example is 'Mystery of Time and Space' (<http://www.albartus.com/motas/>) in which 'the adventurer has to solve riddles and puzzles, find and use objects, escape from locked rooms, find hidden passages and be a detective and examine everything to unlock the doors of the mystery of time and space'. Some other games can be found here: www.languagegames.org

Encourage communication in online role-playing games

The term 'MMORPG' stands for 'massively multiplayer online role-playing game'. These games are played by hundreds and sometimes up to hundreds of thousands of people online. They often involve fantasy worlds and elaborate character development. Success in playing the game depends on participants' ability to plan ahead and to use strategies, - crucially-, with the help of others. This involves communication via chat (frequently written but also spoken) and thus offers an opportunity to practise quite extensive forms of transactional writing which is highly 'situated'; where the communication is related to the participants' here and now and is authentic in that context. Many students play these

games in their first language but are quite happy to play in English and are often thankful for help as it will allow them to play with more people. As the teacher you could ask students to print out their chat conversations which you can then use in class to focus on the language used. Alternatively you could participate in the game yourself and join in the chat communication and perhaps help scaffold the conversations. This can also help you identify difficulties your students are having. The most popular MMORPG is World of Warcraft, which has been around for years and is extremely extensive in its plot. A free alternative, albeit more suitable for younger learners, is Disney's Toon Town (<http://play.toontown.com>). This has the advantage that it was designed with children and families in mind and is thus more likely to be free of unwanted language. The description from its website reads:

In Toontown, players, as Toons, join forces to save the world from the invading robot Cogs - humorless business robots who are attempting to turn the colorful, happy world of Toontown into a corporate metropolis. Because Cogs can't take a joke, Toons use cartoon gags to crack them up!

Provide language support around games

Another, relatively straightforward option, is to create help around the games that students play. One interesting project was carried out at King Mongkut University in Thailand. Teachers there found that many students played the game Football Championship Manager. They also found that many students had difficulty understanding the vocabulary in the game. They decided to create a simple support website where students can look up the words, read English descriptions, Thai descriptions and see a picture. Simple, yet effective! You could, of course, choose to focus on any aspect of the language. For example, students may want help with more

communicative aspects of games, such as addressing strangers through chat, or the language for planning and strategising (excellent for practising the future tense, conditionals, etc) in MMORPGs.

You or the students create games

This sounds more daunting than it really is. A number of programmes have been written that allow students to create computer games themselves. One interesting project is 'Scratch' (<http://scratch.mit.edu/>), designed at MIT for children eight years and older. This free software lets students create environments, characters, and animations, using a simplified programming language. There are templates that students can start with and adapt, and students can also create things from scratch (no pun intended). The main aims of Scratch are to help students develop thinking skills, the ability to use technology productively and to learn to develop and follow through a plan, but Scratch can also be integrated into the language classroom. For example, you can ask students to write summaries of their games, or a manual with information on how to use it, or encourage them to create ads to promote their games. You will probably also find that creating the games in class will give ample opportunity for spoken interaction of quite a complex nature, and thus provide an excellent opportunity for language practice. An alternative to Scratch is www.stagecast.com.

A similar option, and one very popular with teenagers, is a form of storytelling called *Machinima*. A contraction of machine and cinema, Machinima is the telling of a story based on games graphics. So, for example, if a student likes a particular game they can use the characters and scenes from those games to 'mod' (modify) them in order to tell their own story. Modding involves taking an existing game or aspect of a game (such as a character) and using software to change it in some way. A word of warning: just as

some games can be violent so can the graphics students derive from those games be unsuitable for use in class. You will probably have to set some clear boundaries here.

A final suggestion is to use *Gamics* (www.gamics.com). A contraction of games and comics, *Gamics* are similar to Machinima, except they involve still images. Students use images from their favourite cartoons to create their own.

Final thoughts

There are a number of drawbacks to using computer games. One is that not everyone in class may be used to playing games and some students may not have access to computers or game consoles. Perhaps you can ask your system administrator to make one of the (free) online games mentioned above available on one or more of the workstations in your school (perhaps at restricted times).

Another potential pitfall is that playing games can be exciting but entertainment in itself does not *necessarily* lead to learning or to learning in the most effective way. You will have to set clear goals for yourself and articulate these to your learners so they know what is expected of them. Similarly, you will have to set rules for what games can be played and when. Some games may not be suitable for use in class. This will also be a concern for parents and administrators. Talk to them and explain what you aim to do and what the intended learning outcomes are. Explain how you will protect the students from inappropriate content.

A practical issue is the cost associated with computer games. Most schools now have computer facilities available for students so the main cost will be for software. Above I have tried to recommend several free programmes. Many students also have access to

computer games at home and you could ask them to use those (and perhaps to share them with students who do not), for example by bringing screenshots back to class (see second idea above). Of course, many of the ideas suggested here do not necessarily require the use of a computer. Various forms of role play and traditional games for example offer opportunities for practice similar to that of computer games. However, with the many free computer games available nowadays and the advantages they offer, it may be worthwhile to experiment.

At times exasperating, at times exhilarating, computer games are almost never boring. You are likely to see strong student involvement. Your challenge will be to channel that involvement in ways that actually benefit the development of writing skills. Oh, and to have as much fun in the process as possible. Game on!

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