

USING VIDEO GAMES AS SOURCES FOR STORY-BASED ENGLISH CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

Using narratives as sources of motivation and authentic language samples is not a recent idea. The fact, however, that a certain genre of video games (the ones based on complex narratives) can also be used for the same reason and they even provide more options for further audiovisual language activities is rather less discussed in the areas of EFL and teacher training. With my paper, I would like to shed some light on this relatively new opportunity teachers and the teachers of future teachers might want to exploit, that is, the opportunity of using video games as sources for story-based English classes.

KEYWORDS

education, language teaching, EFL, video games, creativity

INTRODUCTION

The idea of using various types of texts for effective language learning in language classes has been circulating in the minds of teachers and methodologists for decades (or even more). The best proof for this statement are the very techniques of the numerous methodologies which are based on different language acquisition theories. A very early attempt, the Grammar Translation Method tried to teach a language through detailed analysis of literary texts, then the Audio-lingual method focused on listening and speaking via drilling, later the Community Language Learning emphasized spoken interaction with the help of counseling, while the Task-Based Language Teaching method's main idea was to make the students learn a language through the process of solving meaningful tasks (Richards – Rodgers [1], Harmer [2]). It has become widely accepted that none of these methods are perfect, but at the same time, all of them have techniques which can be very effective in certain conditions (Cook [3]). I believe that the conditions for using video games as sources for various types of activities for (mostly, but not exclusively) story-based English classes are nowadays better than ever.

In this paper I try to provide a rationale for why the previous statement holds true by first focusing on using video games in education in general and then I concentrate on the question of what story-based English classes are and why they can be effective, in which part I also deal with how the story-based language teaching approach can be “upgraded” by certain types of video games. Finally I provide examples for language activities based on video games and I list ideas for further activity types and also for future research in this area.

1 Video games in education

Playing video games in moderation (!) has numerous advantages in general. Any search in any search engine of academic articles, papers and books lists innumerable results which clearly show that video games have great educational value and power as well as they are

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very effective for improving a number of both mental and physical skills (e.g. Green – Kaufman [4], Barr [5], [6]).

The popular TED.com website [7], which aims at spreading new, innovative and creative ideas has a full playlist about video games in education with the title *The illuminating benefits of video games* [8]. The point of a TED talk (presentation) is that it has to convey the idea(s) of the speaker in an entertaining, engaging, precise and brief (about 15–20 minutes) way, and this is the same reason why I believe looking at these ideas might come useful for teachers.

Jane McGonigal, the author of the book *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* [9] is the first speaker of the playlist with her TED talk titled *Gaming can make a better world*. In this talk McGonigal tells the audience that relatively recent historical and archaeological findings reveal that great world problems (e.g. famine) were solved because of a certain game people with decision-making power played. She uses multiple examples to show that it is possible to create games which might help us in solving the problems of our global societies by engaging players' problem-solving skills – something that games are exceptionally good at.

The second talk on the playlist is given by Karoliina Korppoo with the title *How a video game might help us build better cities*. In her talk, Korppoo tries to convince the audience that city building simulator games can help us in designing better functioning cities around the world. She and her team created a video game called *Cities: Skylines* which is now played by millions of players. This game requires the players to come up with creative ideas about city design and then create a virtual city based on them and see how well they would function. Some players went as far as consulting urban engineers to make their own cities functioning and realistic, which is a great proof for the fact that video games can invoke powerful intrinsic motivation in players.

A cognitive researcher Daphne Bavelier, the TED speaker of the next talk on the playlist, talks about how video games affect our cognitive apparatus. Her talk's title is *Your brain on video games*, in which she explains that many stereotypical beliefs about gaming are false. Two of the most widely accepted misbeliefs are that long screen time while playing makes our eyesight worse and that games cause attention problems. In the laboratory her research team found that it is not only that these two claims are false, but games can even make our eyesight better and increase our attention span. They were also able to prove that a number of other cognitive skills (e.g. thinking in abstract geometry, multitasking) can be improved by playing video games. She emphasizes, however, that playing in moderation is key, if one aims at using video games for improving skills which then could be applied in real life.

The titles of the remaining talks of the playlist clearly suggest that video games have advantages worth exploiting consciously in other areas of life (e.g. education): *How games make kids smarter*, *A video game to cope with grief*, *Gaming for understanding*, *7 ways games reward the brain*. Surely, the highly positive attitude toward the benefits of gaming might evoke a little suspicion about whether the situations these results were found in had been realistic or rather too ideal. There is a trend, however, in many fields (directly or indirectly) connected to video games and gaming, which reflects not only a rising interest in the potential of the demonized activity of playing video games, but also a rising tendency of using scientific research methodologies to design and conduct randomized trials in order to acquire reliable results (Ivory [10], Stanmore et. al. [11]).

2 Stories and language classes

Before I continue with a list and brief description of some of the reasons why using stories in language classes can be beneficial, it is necessary to specify what I mean by ‘stories’ in this context. Under the term ‘story’ I mean a fictional narrative, i.e. a sequence of events with one or more characters. It is clear that this definition also applies for the more generally used ‘literary text’ phrase, there is a reason, however, I keep using ‘stories’ instead, which is that while the former prevents me from using it also in the context of video games, the latter allows it. Thus, the reason for using the term stories over the phrase literary text is simply to be able to use them without being bound to one type of medium.

The idea of using literary texts (i.e. stories in a written form) in the language classroom has been analyzed, applied and evaluated in detail by many researchers (e.g. Collie – Slater [12], Lazar [13], Puskás [14]). The benefits and advantages of either creating activities based on literary texts or teaching the language basically exclusively through literature are clear and quite numerous. Some of these advantages are:

- it is motivating;
- it enriches students’ language use in general;
- it is authentic material;
- it broadens student’s knowledge about (other) culture(s);
- it is entertaining and fun;
- it helps students in personal development;
- it enriches vocabulary.

The full list is very long, but since most of those advantages of using literary texts which are relevant from the point of view of video games are already present in this rather brief list. Instead of listing all the remaining benefits, I would rather focus on how these factors connect literary texts to video games.

Although the motivating elements of a literary text can be numerous, the one which appeals to students’ curiosity is probably the strongest: the continuous revealing of the puzzle of the narrative. A story, due to its very nature, can easily catch and hold the attention of the reader by slowly uncovering the central puzzle, whether it is (“only”) a description of a life segment of a character or the solving of a riddle through a dangerous adventure. Therefore reading a story directly generates intrinsic motivation for finishing it. The level of this motivation, however, depends mostly on the “quality” of the story, which is why teachers have to be extremely careful with selecting literary materials for their language classes.

Everything said about a story in the previous paragraph applies also for a massively large group of video games – these are the games which revolve around a central story which is revealed for the player through playing. Within this large group of video games there is a genre which tries its best to remain close to a central story as much as possible, and this genre is the story-based video game. Without going into the highly interesting, although extremely numerous details, for our purposes now, it is enough to mention that these types of video games take a story and tell it audiovisually in such a way so that the player could interact with it. The level of this interaction and also the extent to which it influences the ending (some games have alternative endings) of the story varies game to game, but at minimum, the player has to make some decisions about the flow of the story repeatedly through the game. Because of these two extra factors (i.e. audiovisual element and interaction) a video game raises the intrinsic motivation to a higher level than it already is in case of a text-only story.

The second entry in the list states that literary texts can enrich students’ language use in general. In the same way as with motivation, this claim applies for video games as well, especially for story-based video games. What is more, the enrichment is happening on an

entirely new level. In case of video games the player is exposed to the language not only in written form (in form of subtitles and captions on the screen) but also in audio form, therefore the listening and pronunciation skills can also be engaged and improved throughout gaming (as opposed to reading). From the point of view of improving pronunciation, some of the games are extremely rich sources of authentic pronunciations of various variants and even dialects of English, which, from a teaching perspective, is another advantage of the audiovisual element of video games.

It is possible to go through the remaining entries of the list in a very similar manner as done in the previous two paragraphs with the first two entries. It is quite clear that – as far as the advantages of using them in the classroom goes – story-based video games have the same advantages as using literary texts, and some of these advantages are even heightened by the fact that video games inherently contain an audiovisual layer as well, which can easily be exploited by teachers for creating activities to improve language skills which would not be possible to do in case of a text-only medium.

Using video games in the classroom, however, has some disadvantages which (most) literary texts do not have. First and foremost, their availability might be a problem in the sense that while many literary texts are freely available (or are free for educational purposes), the large majority of video games are not. Despite the fact that many story-based video games are sold for about the price of three to five coffees, i.e. they are inexpensive, the fact that students have to pay for them might be a problem in schools. The second biggest disadvantage of using video games as teaching materials is the fact that for most of the activities based on video-games, the student actually has to play the game, which means that a computer or a video game console is required (the gaming part, of course, is done at home either in form of a project work or individually). Similarly, in spite of the fact that most students have a computer and/or a video game console at home, the idea that students are required to play a video game for a school assignment might cause problems. There is also a potential disadvantage of getting the disapproval and/or dislike of parents if a teacher wants to implement video games as teaching materials. This problem, however, can be prevented if the idea of how the implementation would be done is described to the parents in detail, so they could be assured that the practice would not cause any harm (e.g. in form of addiction) to the students, what is more, it would provide multiple benefits which text-only materials could not.

3 Considerations for teachers

Using video games in any form in a classroom setting requires some important considerations from teachers. The first thing one has to acknowledge is that using video games in education is still a relatively new area of study, therefore there are no exact methodologies with techniques which would provide a stable framework during planning the lessons. It is also important, however, that this fact should not prevent us from carefully experimenting with video game-based activities on our lessons – implementing and evaluating new ideas into our own way of teaching is, after all, how we develop ourselves as teachers.

Secondly, it is important to keep in mind that – depending on the type of tasks we want to include – putting together activities based on video games might require computer skills ranging from basic to advanced (e.g. creating in-game screenshots and/or video recordings, extracting captions, subtitles or larger pieces of texts from the game, file conversions of various kinds).

Material selection is another area which needs consideration. While in case of using literary texts in the language classroom a teacher can choose from novellas, short stories or poems, which can be read and evaluated for use in a relatively short time, selecting the right video game (especially if one does not have experience with video games) might be

moderately, or even extremely time-consuming, since in order to be able to thoroughly assess whether a specific video game could be used in the class the teacher has to play the game through. Most story-based video games can be played through in 2–4 hours (which is why given as a home assignment for students, it requires at least a week before any activity based on the video game can be used in class), but the walkthrough time of video games ranges from less than an hour to basically infinity (in case of open-world games). In most cases, however, a full walkthrough of the game can be replaced by the freely available thorough reviews one can find online – that is, if the aim is to assess whether the given game should be used for creating activities based on it or not.

Lastly, it is important to consider what our purpose is with integrating video games into our language classes because it can clearly show us the approach we should take with creating activities based on them. In this paper, for example, I am focusing on the story-based English classes, therefore the activities described in the next section are based on the narrative elements of the video games. As teachers, however, we might take completely different approaches; e.g. audio segments of games can be used to improve pronunciation skills and introduce the varieties or even dialects of English, captions or subtitles can be used to create various fill in the blank or information gap tasks, project assignments connected to video games can be used to improve creativity, dialogue excerpts can be used for drama-based activities etc.

4 Video game-based activities for story-based language classes

As stated in the previous section, it is possible to create all types of activities based on a story-based video game as the ones created based on a literary text, since those narrative elements which are usually used for creating the activities (e.g. character description, dialogues, story conflict(s), twists) can be found in stories irrespective of the type of medium which contains them.

Before continuing with the description of the video game-based language activities, there is a factor which has to be considered by the teacher first which affects the very first step in the process of creating an activity for a specific lesson. First we have to decide whether we want to find and use a game for some activity types already in mind, or we want to find a video game and create all sorts of activities based on it. The difference between these two situations might seem to be little, although it greatly influences the time spent on creating the activities, since while in the first case, we already know what type of activities we want to create, in the second case we “only” are searching for a source which we want to use for creating probably multiple types of activities – this latter case therefore requires an even higher level of creativity from the teacher.

In this section, I provide examples for five different types of activities which are not specific to any video game or video game genre, although they work best with story-based ones. These activities are primarily designed for EFL classes, but in case of having the option of multiple languages in the video game, the activities can be used with any other foreign language. The description of each activity contains some practical advice and tips as to how they can be created and implemented with ease. The five activity types are the following:

- using story characters for creative alternative storylines;
- group project assignment for creating a story prequel;
- questions for predictions about the continuation of the story;
- vocabulary highlights for improving comprehension;
- finding the right sequence of story segments.

4.1 Using story characters for creative alternative storylines

This type of activity focuses on engaging students' creativity by giving them almost absolute freedom in creating alternative storylines from the selected video game(s). From the point of view of the genre of the game, story-based ones work probably the best with this type of activity, mainly because those are the ones which include multiple characters whose points of views are directly accessible through playing the game, which is essential – otherwise the students (i.e. players) would not be able to imagine any alternative storyline for the character they get for the task. The best is if there are at least 4–6 different characters who are important from the point of view of the main storyline of the game, that is, who play an important role in how the events are unfolding. The reason this number of characters is needed is that the level of engagement of students seems to be the highest if they do this type of activity in groups. With cooperation in an engaged and motivated environment within the groups, the students' potential creativity also raises to a very high level mostly because of the positive effects of brainstorming multiple ideas. In a normal size class (15–20 students) with groups of 3–5 there would be 4–6 groups – hence the need for 4–6 characters. As teachers, what we need to do in order to create this type of activity, is to find a game and pick the number of characters from the game which is the same as the number of groups we want to create in our class. A prerequisite from the teacher is that s/he should be familiar with the entire story of the selected video game. This prerequisite also applies for the students, which is why the first task they receive is to play the game through. After they are familiar with the story of the game (i.e. with the characters' storylines), they are ready for the activity. The task is simple to create. The teacher should first divide the students into groups, then each groups should get a character from the game. Their task is to think about the storyline of the character and create some alternative events which are directly caused by their character and which then partially or entirely affect the outcome of the story. At this point, the teacher has to consider the amount of time s/he wants to allocate for this activity, because that is what the the way task should be phrased depends on. The more time we can allocate for the activity the more alternative events we can ask for. Another factor the teacher can change depending on their aim with the activity and the level of the students is the extent to which the alternative events should be realistic from the point of view of the game. It is essential to leave enough time for the groups to share their alternative storylines with the class on the same lesson the activity is given for them, so that they could read them with the level of engagement and enthusiasm they built up during the activity. This activity works quite well from intermediate level to advanced.

4.2 Group project assignment for creating a story prequel

In case of this type of activity the number of students we have in the class is less important as it is in the case of the alternative storyline type of activity, although, it is still not irrelevant, since the number of students in the class affects the (classroom) time we need for the activity. The first step is to select a game with a story which has a clear beginning in the sense that the player cannot influence the very beginning of the story by interacting with the game. The reason why this is important is that there are quite a number of video games where the player is immersed into the story right at the very beginning and is asked to make decisions which affect the flow of the story (and there is also a group of games where the beginning of the story is intentionally made complicated with e.g. a time traveling element). After the teacher selected the video game, the students can be informed about it and the task should also be given to them at the same time. This activity uses the project method, therefore the first step is to divide the class into groups of 2–3. The task for the whole class is to first play the game through (individually or in groups – they can choose what is more comfortable for them), and then to think about creating a prequel to the story of the game. Depending on the level of

difficulty the teacher wants them to work on, relative parameters of this assignment can be given and set accordingly (e.g. the prequel should have a flashback in the far past, a character's important childhood event should be included, player interaction is allowed etc.). After the deadline is over, the groups should present their projects to the whole class during which part discussions are likely to develop. Depending on the type of evaluation and assessment the teacher is using, the project can also be turned into a competition where the whole class votes on the best prequel.

4.3 Questions for predictions about the continuation of the story

Creating this type of activity is very time-consuming, although it has great advantages from the point of view of the improvement of both language and creative thinking skills of students. In the same way as in case of the previous two types of activities, although story-based video games are preferred as source materials, many other genres can be used. The most important criterion while selecting a video game for this activity must be to find one which has as little amount of story branching as possible, that is, the game has to be centered around one main storyline. The reason for this criterion is that it allows for future predictions to be made at basically any point of the story, which is what the task of the students will be in this type of activity. After the teacher finds a suitable video game s/he has to pay attention while playing it through, since the best and least time-consuming way of creating the questions for the activity is to pause the game during the first walkthrough and put down the questions on the fly. The questions should be simple and should be such so that the students would be able to answer them with future predictions about how the game's story would follow. The questions can be connected to any element of the game (e.g. characters, events, locations, effects of the player's decision etc.). Depending on the level of proficiency of the students, the teacher can ask a series of questions ranging from the ones requiring a short answer to the ones which need a detailed and lengthy description of the students' predictions. While creating the questions, the teacher should pay attention to pause the game at places where s/he thinks it is likely the students would be able to fight the urge of curiosity and pause, too. Most story-based video games have clearly separated parts, usually chapters, which function well as places to pause for the questions. While the task for the activity is given to the students, it is essential to let them know that the whole point of this activity is to come up with predictions, therefore by not following this rule they deprive themselves from all the fun which is caused by comparing the prediction to what really happens in the game.

4.4 Vocabulary highlights for improving comprehension

The first three types of activities I mentioned above are all focusing on engaging the students' creative skills by asking them to create alternative and/or supplementary parts to the story. This activity's purpose is to improve their vocabulary and comprehension skills. Depending on how much time the teacher wants to allocate for this activity, a partial walkthrough of the selected video game might be enough. What is important in selecting the game for this activity is that it has to have the option of enabling subtitles in all parts of the game. The reason why this is essential is that the students' (i.e. players') task is to pay close attention to the text while they are playing in order to be able to identify the pronunciation of the words with their written form. All the teacher has to do is to find words which s/he thinks are potentially unknown to the students and extract short contexts from the text of the video game from around the selected words. These should be compiled into a handout form. The length of the context should depend on how much the teacher wants the students to rely on their memory from playing the game as well as the level of difficulty s/he wants them to work on. The students' first task is to play the game with captions and subtitles enabled at least until

the part which the teacher specifies and while playing, focus on the unknown words. While playing a video game, many times the player has to complete missions, assignments and tasks, which are almost impossible to accomplish without knowing exactly what they have to do – i.e. they have to be able to understand their tasks in order to progress in the game which creates a strong motivation for them to check the meaning of any key unknown words even without them receiving this as a specific task from the teacher. After they finished playing the game until the requested part as a home assignment, the teacher can distribute the handouts to them, right after the class is divided into teams of 2–3. Their task is to explain the meanings of the highlighted words on the handouts first by referring to the game and then in general. This activity can easily be turned into a competition by giving the students the chance to receive points for right answers. Summing up and comparing the points after they are done with all the activity reveals the winner group. The level of difficulty of the meaning-explanation part of the activity can be set by the teacher by specifying how the explanation should be like (e.g. it should contain at least 5 sentences, or it should contain at least 2 synonyms, or it should contain at least one example sentence in which the given word is used etc.).

4.5 Finding the right sequence of story segments

Out of all five activities described in this section, this is the one which – in case of most games – requires the most time and computer skills from the teacher to prepare. The reason for this is that for this activity, the story of the game is needed in text format. Depending on how detailed and comprehensive we want the activity to be, we have the options of either using the exact same text which is part of the game (captions, subtitles, on-screen text), or writing short summaries of different parts of the game. Extracting the text from the game can be done either by third-party software or with the simple (but more time-consuming) method of taking screenshots and using an OCR (image to text) software to convert them into text format. Writing short summaries requires no computer skills and unless we want this activity to cover both a great part (or the whole) of the video game as well as our lesson(s), this method is probably the right choice for us. The minimum number of story segments (text pieces) we need is 10, since, if we have less than this number, the activity becomes too easy in case of an average length video game. The next step is to create handouts, but we should pay attention to format the document in a way so that it would be easy to cut into pieces. Each piece should contain one story segment and the students should get them mixed. Their task is to put them into the right order based on the chronology of the events of the video game's story. In a similar way as with all the previous activities, this one also work best if the students do it in groups – more students working together on finding the right sequence of events enables an entirely new level of engagement as opposed to students working individually. The positive effects of brainstorming are exploited in this activity as well, if we opt for group work instead of working individually. The activity can very easily be upgraded and expanded by including visuals, too. These images should reflect certain key moments of the story which match the selected story segments. From the point of view of preparation, the only extra equipment the teacher needs is a color printer (and to be able to know how to make screenshots). Asking the students, then, to match the right story segments with the images as well as to put them into the right order might make them more motivated due to the addition of the visual stimuli. Another way of updating this activity with visuals is to swap certain story segments with printed visual images. In this version of the activity the students' task is to put the text-only story segments (the cut-up pieces) as well as the images into the right chronological order and then tell the story by describing what key moments of the story they

think are represented by the visuals. This version of the activity greatly increases its difficulty compared to the one where the images should “only” be matched with the text pieces.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is a substantial amount of research pointing to the fact that playing video games can be beneficial to the player from the point of view acquiring and/or improving mental and/or physical skills. We have to recognize, however, that the key word in the previous sentence is ‘can’; i.e. playing video games can be beneficial if the conditions and circumstances the playing happens in (e.g. time spent on playing, types of games played) are consciously checked and moderated. Using video games in education is an idea which comes to mind naturally if one accepts the fact that playing video games can have advantages in general. By looking at any statistics about the hours people are spending with playing it is logical to think about trying to exploit another aspect of this activity – i.e. using it in education. There are numerous ways this can be done ranging from designing educational video games to using video games as sources of motivation in general teaching. In this paper I tried to point out that video games can be used in language teaching as well. Due to the fact that most video games are produced in English language, the EFL context has an advantage here, although, the growing tendency for game localization does seem to open the potential for video game-based activities for most languages.

Using literary texts in language teaching as an optional method is generally taught on (language) teacher training programs, partly because of the motivational power of stories (Puskás [15]). As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, video games – especially story-based ones – also possess almost all features of literary texts and they even have more, (e.g. a stimulating audiovisual element or the ability to interact with the story) therefore it would be logical to include the idea of using them as an optional method in teacher training programs so that future language teachers would know that they have this option of effectively engaging students.

Video games are definitely motivational for many students which means that using them on language lessons for catching their attention is something teachers should certainly practice. Regarding using them for activities, there is still need for accurate, reliable and large-scale empirical data to make sure that the extra time for creating the activities is compensated by the efficacy of acquiring the intended knowledge. I believe there is a need for detailed classroom observations with some kind of testing to be able to measure certain aspects of performance in terms of acquired vocabulary and improved comprehension and grammar skills. In order to really see whether using video games as sources for activities as opposed to e.g. activities in a course book is a better (i.e. more effective) choice, one needs to have control groups where only a small number of factors differ (preferably only the activities) so as to arrive at as objective results as possible. I want to point out, however, that during a class there are factors which are very difficult to measure, because they are hard to quantify, but at the same time are crucially important from the point of view of how the lesson flows. One of these factors is the classroom atmosphere, which is closely connected to the level of motivation of the students – which to a great extent depends on the source materials used by the teacher. It is very likely that topics and materials connected to the nowadays highly popular video games are going to be motivational, therefore – if presented with the right amount of enthusiasm from the teacher – will probably evoke a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere. Although it is difficult, this factor should also be taken into account

while comparing classroom observation results of lessons with and without using video games.

In this paper I argued for the idea that video games can be used beneficially on language classes, especially on those where some activities or the entire lesson revolves around a story, usually for the reason of evoking interest and providing motivation. I also listed descriptions and practical advice for five different types of activities which teachers can create based on video games. I hope the paper helped in making the idea that video games can be effective sources of materials for language classes compelling and worthy of a try.

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The paper was written in the framework of KEGA grant project *Improving creativity and teaching English as a foreign language creatively at primary and secondary schools* (Rozvoj kreativity a kreatívna výučba anglického jazyka na základných a stredných školách) Project no. 006UJS-4/2019 at the J. Selye University, Faculty of Education.