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Language at Play: Digital Games in Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. Language Learning & Technology

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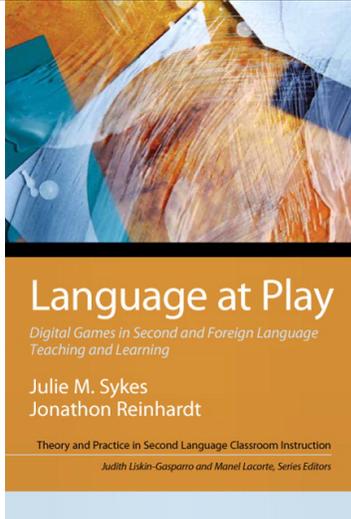
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REVIEW OF *LANGUAGE AT PLAY: DIGITAL GAMES IN SECOND AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING*

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| <p>Language at Play: Digital games in second and foreign language teaching and learning</p> <p>Julie Sykes and Jonathan Reinhardt</p> <p>2013</p> <p>ISBN 10: 0-205-00085-1</p> <p>US \$33.33</p> <p>157 pp.</p> <p>Pearson</p> <p>New York, US</p> |  |
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Review by [Steven L. Thorne, Portland State University](#) and [University of Groningen](#)
and [Erin Watters, Portland State University](#)

The use of games as learning activities has likely existed for as long as have formal (or ‘serious’) approaches to teaching and learning. In the new millennium, it is difficult to avoid what would appear to be hyperbole in regard to digital gaming environments. The strong and growing interest in digital games, coupled with rapid technological advancements, have created what is unquestionably one of the most inventive, fast-moving, complex media enterprises currently in existence. Game designers draw upon academic research originating in psychology, computer science, and the learning sciences, and reciprocally, within the academy new degree programs such as game studies are emerging. While commercially produced recreational games benefit from the greatest influx of capital and expertise, approaches to structuring learning environments that leverage game mechanics and pedagogies are now routine in settings as diverse as the military, management training, museum kiosks, DNA research, social justice awareness, and increasingly, for the teaching and learning of otherwise conventionally defined academic content.

Importantly, and in tandem with the factual accuracy of the above statements, gaming is also associated with many problems, not the least of which is the polarized public assessment of online games, the negative binary of which presumes that online games are violent (some are, many are not), addictive (an unresolved debate that continues), and that gaming is the passionate focus of primarily adolescent males (patently false, for discussions see Cornillie, Thorne, & Desmet, 2012; Thorne & Fischer, 2012). Stepping into the digital gaming fray and performing a tremendous service for second language educators and researchers alike, Julie Sykes and Jonathon Reinhardt have produced an ambitious book-length treatment, *Language at play: Digital games in second and foreign language teaching and learning*, that is admirably comprehensive in scope and which adeptly aligns second language acquisition (SLA) and pedagogy research with practical strategies for the use of games in foreign and second language (L2) instructional contexts. The book uses the acronym L2TL, standing for second language teaching and learning, and for purposes of economy, we will employ the same in this review.

Before beginning the chapter-by-chapter review, it is relevant to note that this is a dialogically written text

that thoroughly engages the reader. Most chapters open with a ‘scenario’ that narrativizes a focal topic through the presentation of (presumably) fictive classroom situations, many of which include situated descriptions of teachers’ as well as learners’ viewpoints and experiences. Enhanced versions of the scenarios are revisited at the end of each chapter in order to situate specific L2TL theory and practice themes in instructed L2 contexts. While some of the scenarios feel more forced than others, classroom teachers, and those in training to be such, will find them to be useful anchors. Additionally, each chapter is interspersed with questions to the reader in sections labeled *Your Reflections* and *Scenario Questions* (often two or three of each per chapter), which request the reader to articulate and/or contrast their own circumstances or experiences with the content under discussion. This feature would be useful for teacher preparation, classroom use and practicing educators alike. Finally, game-related activities and suggestions that build upon core themes (e.g., interaction, feedback, context, motivation) conclude each chapter. Especially in view of a potentially diverse readership, we have found the text to be clearly and interactively designed.

In the *Preface*, Sykes and Reinhardt provide an overview of how to use the volume and describe a number of their central aims:

- To highlight how digital games can inform and potentially transform L2 pedagogy. They do this by arraying the following themes across five of the chapters: Chapter 2: Learning tasks and goal orientation; Chapter 3: Interaction; Chapter 4: Feedback; Chapter 5: Context; and Chapter 6: Motivation.
- To describe the behaviors, practices, and cultures of games as sociologically significant contexts for learning.
- To encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between SLA, game design, and learning specialists to develop effective L2 learning games.

Chapter one attunes the reader to the terminology of games as learning environments, beginning with definitions of key terms such as *language* (e.g., Halliday’s (1978) notion of social-semiotic practice), *play* (e.g., distinctions between rule-bound and open-ended play), and *game* (typically rule-bound with internal reward systems; may include imaginative/creative experiences coupled with problem solving). These terms are explored in short but heavily referenced discussions of relevant research literatures, and appropriate caveats suggest that there is considerable variability in how these terms may be applied in specific circumstances. Also in the chapter, Sykes and Reinhardt turn to the question of how gameplay is related to learning, focusing primarily on game literacy as a kind of new media literacy practice (e.g., Gee, 2007) that may inculcate dispositions and abilities that are relevant to other learning and problem solving situations (e.g., Steinkuehler, 2007). A key distinction is made between game-enhanced L2TL – the use of vernacular and off-the-shelf commercial games which are not themselves designed for language learning *per se*—and game-based L2TL, which refers to game environments developed particularly for language learning purposes. This is a useful approach since, in addition to the obvious consideration of games designed specifically for L2 learning purposes, many language educators (and learners) may want to explore the use of an L2 in the often highly interactive, social and event-driven scenarios of online games.

The second chapter interpolates digital games through the lenses of goal orientation and task-based language teaching (or TBLT, see Ellis, 2003; Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). The overview of TBLT, which describes both its pedagogical utility as well as criticisms of TBLT from within the SLA research literature (e.g., the differences between a ‘task’ and an ‘activity’), will be particularly useful for readers who are less familiar with L2 pedagogy or who wish to use TBLT to better understand the mechanics and pedagogical structuring of digital games (for the latter, see Fullerton, 2008). The chapter concludes with the presentation of a literacy-informed approach that focuses on L2 writing through ‘game journaling,’ essentially an awareness-raising activity that has students play games and record their observations by responding to written prompts (see activity 2B, p. 29). Additionally, there is an exercise

encouraging readers to design a game that focuses on goals specific to L2 learning. These activities highlight the expansive view of games that Sykes and Reinhardt seek to convey with this text – game play itself may be directly useful to language learning, but it can also serve as a catalyst for later L2 activity (i.e., ‘game journaling’, mentioned above) and as a way for educators, and potentially students, to reframe language learning goals and the processes that may contribute to reaching them (i.e., the game design activity).

In chapter three, the focus is “interaction with, through, and about digital games” (p. 32). The framing of this chapter is far-reaching and addresses interaction viewed through the lens of systemic functional linguistics, focusing on ideational interactions *with* games, interpersonal interactions *through and around* games, and textual interaction *about* games (pp. 36-40), as well as discussion of the importance of social context as it relates to opportunities for the negotiation for meaning. The number of frameworks and dimensions that are included here may challenge some readers, but as with all chapters in the volume, the presence of classroom scenarios, guiding questions, and ‘summary and implication’ sections allow readers with varied interests and background with SLA and linguistic theory to read selectively. Importantly, Sykes and Reinhardt present compelling examples of how interaction in the classroom can be informed, and possibly enhanced, by attention to how games are structured, and additionally they make the point that revisiting game experiences in the classroom (‘wrap-around’ activities) can enhance opportunities for learning. A taxonomy of games types and genres, with suggestions for their use in L2TL contexts, is included in Appendix 2 for additional reference.

Chapter four focuses on feedback, an essential element to both instructed L2 learning and game play experience. Drawing primarily on the sociocultural concepts of zone of proximal development and scaffolding, the authors explain that feedback is itself an important form of instruction. The chapter touches on challenges instructors may face in giving feedback, such as inadequate time to provide individualized and temporally immediate support, and then describe how commonly used game mechanics address these issues. A quite comprehensive description of common feedback mechanisms used in online games is depicted in table format (p. 61), and additional examples of game-based, game-enhanced and game-informed feedback-as-instruction are included at the end of the chapter.

Chapters five and six explore the roles of context and motivation, respectively, as they relate to processes of language learning and online gaming environments. The context discussion revisits Hallidayan notions of context of situation to describe the importance of embedding discrete elements of the L2 in more complex realizations of culture and language. Sykes and Reinhardt make a useful two-part distinction between the given and often novelistic narrative of games and actual game play. The latter, termed the “context of play” (p. 73), forms the agentive space that is created through player actions and it is the interplay between a compelling event-driven narrative and player-generated actions that can result in optimal ‘flow activity’ of the sort described by Csikszentmihalyi (e.g., 1990, discussed in Chapter 6). The authors note that not all games possess high-quality narratives, but those that do can form productive language learning environments, especially when learning the L2 is understood as necessary for playing a desirable game. This dynamic of high motivation for a game stimulating (or even providing the core rationale for) L2 learning is perhaps one of the most compelling reasons for language educators (and students) to seriously explore the potential of commercial game environments and the often large and committed communities that develop around them (see also Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009).

Chapter seven pulls the book together as the authors summarize key elements across the text, concluding that developmentally useful games for L2TL (and of course not all are) provide opportunities for high levels of learner agency and engagement, form complex, emergent, and integrated systems, and that successful games promote ‘learning to play’ rather than ‘playing to learn’ (Arnseth, 2006, is referenced here).

Language at Play is a clearly written and tightly organized book. Throughout the volume, the authors

describe, as well as critique and apply to game-related contexts, well-chosen SLA research and pedagogical approaches, and by so doing create a framework that flows coherently across the seven chapters that comprise the volume. Appendixes include a glossary of terms, list of games, guide to game types and genres, and an L2TL-digital game evaluation guide.

In terms of omissions and possible critiques, we note that at first glance, the book may appear to have an overly compartmentalized structure, with a table of contents which alone runs to six full pages. However, an obvious benefit to a highly modularized (and richly intertextually referenced) layout is that readers who are interested in, for example, implementation and pedagogy, can readily find these portions of the text across chapters, and reciprocally, SLA enthusiasts and researchers will have no difficulty locating discussion of relevant theory (here primarily systemic-functional, sociocultural, interactionist, and task-based approaches). We had hoped to see a treatment of augmented reality or “place-based” game design (e.g. Holden & Sykes, 2011; Squire, 2009), which is an increasingly prevalent technique that utilizes GPS-enabled handsets to emplace players in goal-directed actions in the physical world (rather than primarily or only in front of a computer screen), but this was perhaps beyond the scope of the current volume. We had also been expecting a critical discussion of ‘gamification’ – the practice of applying game mechanics and techniques to non-game contexts and problems. In its negative form, gamification has been criticized as the practice of adding points or levels to otherwise pedagogically uninspired activity (e.g., Bogost, 2011) – in other words, a version of the lipstick-on-a-pig problem. Gamification has the potential, of course, to positively transform or even revolutionize some L2TL practices and paradigms, but it is also a seductive, increasingly overused, and often shallowly construed concept, and hence a discussion of this issue would have improved the criticality of volume.

In summary, Sykes and Reinhardt, both of whom are established second language researchers and new media innovators, have brought together processes of language learning, pedagogy, and the use and design of digital games to produce a lucid, engaging, and highly useful volume. The text is rich with examples, provides a variety of exercises, questions, and project types for a diversity of audiences, and includes comprehensive suggestions for additional reading, investigation of existing games, and design ideas for experienced as well as would-be L2TL game developers. In short, the book is an invaluable resource for those engaged in language education, applied linguistics, and the considered use and design of games and related media as they come to inform 21st century trajectories of language development.

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