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Following technological advances in hardware and the emergence of the World Wide Web, interest in commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) digital games has increased dramatically. In addition to their popularity in the entertainment sector, digital games are becoming important in a range of other sectors, from the military and medicine to business and education. In an educational context digital games and simulations underline the importance of an immersive experience. They provide opportunities for the replication of authentic environments, social collaboration and learner participation. On another level, advocates of digital gaming also tap into a wider anti-school discourse in which traditional education is seen to inhibit experiential learning and to lead to learner disengagement and underachievement.

In the last two decades language education has also seen developments in digital technologies that have made significant contributions to computer-assisted language learning (CALL) along similar lines. The research presented in this special issue draws on the wider discourse of CALL, to examine exactly *how* digital games can be integrated into instructed language learning contexts and curricula as well as how *effective* they are in promoting so-called deep learning in autonomous contexts. Drawing on learners' out-of-school use of digital games to enhance motivation, some research does indeed claim that they may contribute to language learning and further studies have been undertaken in the last few years utilising Web 2.0 and Massive Multiuser Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Assertions that digital games could become an integral part of language teaching have been made at varying points over the last two decades, but are clearly yet to be realised. Nevertheless, advances in network-based learning and the large, online communities now using games have stimulated renewed interest in the field. This special edition on digital games and language learning presents four research-based articles dealing with studies undertaken in Asia, a region which is significant in this respect, as it maintains a great interest in language learning and policy formulation as well as a central role in the creation of digital technologies and digital gaming.

In "Learn English or die: The effects of digital games on interaction and willingness to communicate in a language", Hayo Reinders and Sorada Wattana focus on the way digital games can influence patterns of learner interaction in the target language. Based on a pilot study with 26 undergraduate learners of English in an IT faculty in Thailand, the study focuses on the use of the MMORPG *Ragnarok Online* (Gravity, 2002). Their findings suggest that the game was particularly useful as it could be adapted by learners who in turn increased their levels of interaction during the game playing activities in both written and spoken discourse, but particularly in relation to writing. The ability of games to provide a low anxiety environment for language learning was a significant finding but learners still required a reasonable period of time to enhance their confidence in digital environments, a process that relied on careful pedagogic planning of the learning activities.

In the second article, "Learner autonomy development through digital gameplay," Alice Chik focuses on the use of digital games by students in Hong Kong. The study is based on findings from an on-going research project with ten undergraduate gamers and examines the extent to which they exercise learner autonomy by managing a combination of their gaming as both leisure and learning experience. High levels of learner motivation and persistence are indicated by the study and the research suggests

that further analysis of digital games and learner autonomy focusing on the different contexts and strategies deployed by learners is warranted in the future.

In the third article, "Teaching and learning English through digital game projects," Jonathan deHaan moves beyond the concern with language and literacy development to examine game play and game culture in relation to English language learners in Japan. Drawing on both constructivist learning principles and media literacy theories, deHaan's research examines two action research projects in which language learners both created games and game-related media as well as sought to enhance their English language proficiency. Directly using the technology motivated students to participate in teamwork, authentic discussions and creative practices. Nevertheless, technology-intensive projects of this kind were clearly more suited to students from a technical background, and deHaan adds the important caveat that such activities may prove rather more difficult to integrate into less technical and more traditional English language curricula.

In "Digital gaming and second language development: Japanese learners interactions in a MMORPG," Mark Peterson explores the use of massively multiplayer online role-playing games as suitable environments for English language learning. Findings from an experimental qualitative study with Japanese learners highlights a number of the obstacles to the process, focusing in particular on the importance posed by communication in online environments, the appropriate degree of learner training vis-à-vis the technologies used, learner language proficiency levels, and prior gaming experience. Balancing these factors, a range of positive indicators were also identified, including social engagement, reduced anxiety, and exposure to new vocabulary and opportunities for language practice. Finally, the special edition concludes with Darren Elliott's review of Nicola Whitton's new book, *Learning with digital games: A practical guide to engaging students in Higher Education* (2010).

The rigid adherence to prescriptive forms of teaching and the rise of product-oriented or "high stakes" educational testing is often cited as the cause of the disconnect between learners and learning. If digital games have a role to play in articulating a new form of teaching and learning for the digital age, it is still unclear how that will overcome the resistances typically found in formal and instructed educational contexts. Where language learning is concerned, these resistances remain significant on the ground, whatever the rhetoric of transformation may indicate. As the contributions to this edition suggest, research in the area needs to engage with two research questions in particular if it is to make progress: If digital games do enable a paradigmatic transition to a new type of teaching and learning, what principles can be drawn on to facilitate it in language learning contexts? Can digital games be used without adaptation or are bridging strategies required in order to use them in language learning contexts? It is hoped that by foregrounding these questions that this special edition will both stimulate and contribute to further research on digital gaming and second language learning in the future.

Biographical Statement

Michael Thomas BA (Hons) M.Ed. MBA Ph.D. is Senior Lecturer in Language Learning Technologies, School of Languages and International Studies, University of Central Lancashire, UK. He has worked at universities in the UK, Germany and Japan. His research interests are in ICT in education, task-based learning, digital literacies and digital technologies. He is the commissioning editor of a new book series published by Palgrave Macmillan (USA) on "Digital Education and Learning" (with Prof. James Paul Gee and Marc Prensky). Among his publications are *Handbook of Research on Web 2.0 and Second Language Learning* (2009), *Interactive Whiteboards for Education: Theory, Research and Practice* (with Euline Cutrim Schmid) (2010), *Task-Based Language Learning & Teaching with Technology* (with Hayo Reinders) (2010), *Digital Education: Opportunities for Social Collaboration* (2011), *Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, Technology and the New Literacies* (2011), and *Online Learning* (2011). He is editor of the *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments*, and associate editor of the *International Journal of Computer Assisted Language Learning and Teaching.*

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