

A post structuralist understanding of integrating games in education

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INTRODUCTION

It is easier for humans to understand the world in binary terms. Equally, games and play are considered to be **fun**, whereas books and learning are considered **serious** things. We have come to speak of “serious games” to define games where their main purpose is learning; we also talk about “making learning fun” as if it cannot be inherently fun. Post-structuralism views the world beyond such binary categorisations; words and concepts will have the meaning that we attach to them and will be highly contingent of the historical and cultural context that they are embedded in. These blurred lines have become obvious starting from Huizinga’s definition of play which is considered both free activity but also bound by rules, continuing to Callois’ distinction of *paidia* versus *ludus* (de Lange et al., 2015) to conceptualising games as something non-fun, take for example the game *Getting Over It* by Bennett Foddy. As for learning, standardised exams and curricula have made lessons inadvertently attached to something structured and serious. But if we look at a definition of games, they, too, are structured and serious. Learning is also often associated with play: “For humans, real learning is always associated with pleasure and is ultimately a form of play—a principle almost always dismissed by schools.” (Gee, 2012, p.65).

METHODOLOGY

As part of a wider research project, ten language teachers in Greece were trained on game-based learning and were involved in designing and applying game-informed tasks for their classrooms. Following a qualitative approach and interpretivist epistemology, semi-structured interviews were held with the participants while designing said tasks and after they delivered them in the classroom. The objective was to dig deep and reflect into the pedagogical issues with which language teachers are concerned when applying game-mediated language teaching. The research questions driving this project are: How do teachers integrate games in their classrooms? What drives their pedagogical decisions?

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis followed the data collection process by identifying patterns and constructing contextual meaning. This section discusses one of the uncovered themes: the limits imposed *in practice* when viewing games and learning through the dichotomic lens of what is fun versus what is serious.

In the specific research context under examination, game-based or game-informed learning is a rather novel concept, while gamification proliferates. Games or gamified tasks are inevitably seen as fun, opposed to a serious lesson task or exercise. The next quote by a participant highlights this contradiction:

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“I don’t want to forget that **it is a game**, and they (students) **should have fun** and talk and communicate and it’s not just (do) lesson’s exercises.” (Teacher 1)

Simultaneously, language teachers during interviews voiced their concerns on the limits of gamification and the dilemmas gamification surfaces:

“I keep replaying the game part of the lesson and then I’m always wondering: okay **was that fun enough**, but **was it educational as well**? Did it work? **Was it just a game to the kids**? Do they also learn?” (Teacher 8).

Let us consider the below extract taken from another participant when reflecting on a why they did not redesign a task through a game-informed approach:

“Today I told them -students- to write some words they hear so that I can check spelling. So, I thought [...] to find [...] a different way to do that; using a game to do that, but then I thought: no, I wanted to do that seriously and now I’m thinking about it. I know that **students play seriously** and I’m thinking: why didn’t I do that? This is what I haven’t found. I mean I felt that: no, this is a serious thing; I want to assess that; it cannot be through a game; not for this thing, but I don’t know why. I mean; we used games to assess other things; I don’t know why; I haven’t really answered that.” (Teacher 4)

The dilemma of the teacher is clear and so is the subsequent realisation that students would be involved in a game seriously. The teacher here implicitly considers their teaching goal serious, but the medium through which it can be achieved, i.e., game, as non-serious, and hence the dilemma develops.

CLOSING REMARKS

Similar reflections as to the findings presented above were expressed by other teachers. The purpose of integrating a game in the classroom, as expressed by participants, was to provide an alternative way of practicing the language or a platform to communicate in the target language and have fun. Games, when put into the classroom context, immediately become fun objects. However, the proliferation of gamification abuses the essence and meaning of a game or playful experience. Gamification has introduced rewards, an already well-established concept in conditional learning (Becker & Nicholson, 2016) in the same serious, structured, and monotonous way. Gamified learning tools are similar to how tests and quizzes introduce points and scores, deprived of all playfulness and exploration. Gamification is a sugar-coated experience of assessment: only if the learning has already been acquired, the player-student is rewarded; if not, the learner is left with negative reinforcement. Gamification, thus, is not a fun way of learning; it is an alternative way of assessing quantifiably. Just as much as it can be facilitative engagement-wise, it can also potentially be debilitating from a motivational perspective.

Taking into consideration the above, re-conceptualising games as serious objects and learning as a fun experience can help drive pedagogical decisions beyond the current limits that gamification has laid upon. Post-structurally understanding the terms of what a game and a lesson can be associated with can foster a proper rhetoric ground for re-conceptualising what needs to be (viewed as) fun and/ or serious.

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