Video Games and the ESL Classroom

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This paper looks at ways how video games can be integrated into the ESL classroom. It gives teachers ideas on how to use this new technology as part of the ESL curriculum, and addresses some issues that might be of concern to the educator implementing them as teaching tools.

Introduction

Video games invoke different reactions in people. Some might think of them as nothing more than a means of entertainment, while others might consider them evil satanic tools. Some academics, like James P. Gee and Mark P. Wolf, will say that video games are a new form of interactive media worthy of academic multidisciplinary study. Whatever else they may be, it is an obvious fact that video games are an entertaining way to spend time amongst the young. It is then no surprise that educators are striving to incorporate video games into their lessons both to catch and keep the attention of the students as well as to enhance course content. Many business, medicine, and law schools are using video games like *Kristen's Cookies*, *Dexter!*, and *Objection!* Respectively as part of their curriculum, and even some schools incorporate commercial titles such as *Brain Age DS* and *Trauma Center* into their math and sciences courses. Video games are becoming more widespread in their use, both as a pastime and as an educational resource. ESL teachers should also be able of taking advantage of this technology and use it to help students.

Role Playing Games

Not all video games can be considered classroom-safe. A lot of video games, while excellent games in their own right, may be too violent or void of content to be used in an ESL classroom. There is, however, one genre of video games that is ideal for the ESL classroom: Role Playing Games.

Traditionally, role plays are associated with pretending to be someone else. This is exactly what a Role Playing Game (RPG) is. In RPGs, players take control of a character and embark in journeys rivaling the greatest Homerian tales or the latest Narnian adventure. While in this quest, perhaps one to save a princess, slay an evil entity, or save the world, the player becomes exposed to long hours of in-game dialogue, as well as heavy amounts of written text. As the player collects information by talking to the characters, he or she advances through the game in order to reach a final goal.

RPGs and the ESL Classroom

If there were to be any kind of video games in an ESL classroom or lab, it would be RPGs. RPGs have long hours of in-game dialogue and a lot of written text. In a video game ESL lab session, the students would play through the game. During this playing time, the students would be exposed to English language dialogue, probably with various accents, which would help the students develop their aural skills. RPGs would also help them develop their reading skills, as the game will not continue unless the player, in this case a student, achieves certain goals which are communicated to the student through either spoken communication or written text. Of course, exposure to a language or text does not produce bilingual students; it is simply not enough. That is why the teacher should design certain activities to get the students talking about the experiences they just had.

Sample Activities

Elements of Literature

Every story, just like every game, has an introduction, rising action, a climax, descending action, and a resolution. A lot of stories, just like a lot of games, have flashbacks, foreshadowing, and personification. It is a good idea to give the students lessons regarding the elements of literature, so that they may be aware of them as they play the game and later write about them in their journals.

Debates About Cultures

All RPGs have stories, and all stories have a setting. Before having the students play a game, the teacher should ask the students about their knowledge of different cultures. Having the students debate about the similarities and differences in their cultures (if a multicultural classroom) or of different cultures in general (if a mono cultural classroom) is a fun way to start. Start off the class by asking the students about what they know about other cultures. Talking about the Maya culture, the Ancient Japanese or Ancient Chinese cultures, and some Native American cultures usually get the students in a talkative mood, as they can bring experiences they have had by watching movies or reading books. After the class discussion, the teacher will tell the students that they are going to play a video game that has elements of different cultures in its world. The teacher should then give a bit of information about the game and its characters, so that the students do not feel completely lost when they begin. Remember that they should only play the game once a week during the class period, or during their own free time, such as recess, as I have found that they enjoy doing.

The Journal

Students can be asked to keep a record of their progress in a journal. The journal will be used once a week, after playing the game. The student will make a short summary of what happened in the game as well as comment on the events from the game that he liked or disliked the most. If the students are at an advanced level they could be asked to comment on some of the more abstract concepts that appear in the game, such as love, friendship, and parenthood. Once the students have finished the game they would write an entry regarding the elements of literature and the video game they played. In their journals they would have short summaries of the events that happened in the game, so they would sort those events into the introduction, the rising action, the climax, the descending action, and the resolution of the game. Some games give open endings and let the players fill in the gaps with their imaginations. In case of games like these, a good journal entry to ask the students for would be one about what they think happened after the game ended.

Character Analysis

Students can be asked to analyze their favorite character from the game. Starting with a drawing of the character, lower level students or elementary school students could talk about how the character looks, talks, and acts, while higher level students could talk about their character's behavior, thoughts, and purposes. The student should always say what their chosen characters stand for (for example, Alex from *Lunar: The Silver Star* for the *Playstation* could be seen as representing friendship, love, or heroism). This would be a good chance to teach the students about empathy by asking them questions like "how would you have felt during this specific event in the game?"

Oral Presentations

The students could give short oral presentations on characters, themes, or plot segments of the game. If there is time and resources enough, the class could put together a play about an event or events from the game.

Quizzes / Tests

A quiz or a test about a video game would be conducted in the same fashion as a quiz or test about a short story or novel would be done. Questions could range from "reading comprehension" (Example: Who does Tidus fight against at the end of *Final Fantasy X*?) to more analytical questions (Example: In *Final Fantasy X*, do you think that Tidus resent his father? Why / Why not?)

Violence and Social Issues

Many of you are probably concerned with the issue of violence in video games and how they affect our youth. There are a lot of people who say that video games make people violent and that video games are to blame for all of the violent events happening today. All of these people will quickly mention the Columbine massacre (a tragedy if there ever was one) and blame it on video games. While it is possible that a needlessly violent game like *Grand Theft Auto* might have had some influence on this sad event (I'm sure that movies like *300*, television shows like *Cops,* classic stories like *The Iliad*, and the ongoing wars all over the world which are broadcasted on our television sets had a similar influence on these young minds), we should not analyze social trends (is there more or less violence now than there was ten years ago when video games were not as popular?) by looking at single incidents. According to Johnson (2005) "Over the last ten years - a period of unprecedented fictional violence in the American household, thanks to *Quake and* Quentin Tarrentino films - the country simultaneously experienced the most dramatic drop in violent crime in its history" (p. 191). Besides, most people realize that the characters and events on the screen are not real.

Johnson also says that:

> "A study in the University of Rochester looked at three groups of white-collar professionals: hard-core gamers, occasional gamers, and non-gamers. The gaming population turned out to be consistently more social, more confident, and more comfortable solving problems creatively. They also show no evidence of reduced attention span compared with non-gamers" (p. 153).

If we look at social trends instead of individualized cases, we will see that video games, in fact, have not made our society more violent than it was.

Suggested Games for Classroom Use

The following list is compiled with students between the ages of 11 and 17 in mind. They have cartoon-like visuals, a good soundtrack, and interesting and funny characters and plots.

- Atelier Iris (Sony Playstation 2)
- Atelier Iris 2 (Sony Playstation 2)
- Arc the Lad (Sony Playstation)
- Arc the Lad 2 (Sony Playstation)
- Final Fantasy 7 (Sony Playstation)
- Final Fantasy Origins (Sony Playstation)
- Final Fantasy Anthologies (Sony Playstation)
- Final Fantasy Chronicles (Sony Playstation)
- Growlanser (Sony Playstation 2)
- Lunar: The Silver Star Story (Sony Playstation)
- Lunar: Eternal Blue (Sony Playstation)
- Paper Mario (Gamecube)
- Radiata Stories (Sony Playstation 2)
- Rhapsody: A Musical Adventure (Sony Playstation)
- Suikoden series (Sony Playstation / Playstation 2)
- Tales of Eternia (Gamecube)

Conclusion

Video games can be used to improve ESL instruction. They expose students to the language, both spoken and written, and the teacher can hold several activities that involve speaking and writing, which allows for integration of the four language skills. Video games also keep the students interested in their stories, so they are willingly immersing themselves in the story worlds. I have had a few of my students do "book reports" on video games, and they are usually more motivated than the students who do them on books, and although their writing usually improves on the same level with students who do the book reports on

novels, the pronunciation of the students who play video games improves faster than that of those who do not play.

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