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Gamifying Language Learning: The potential of VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) for EFL students – An Exploratory Study on Improving Proficiency with Game-Oriented Activities

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Abstract: In recent decades, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has increasingly intersected with digital technologies. Among these, digital and console games, as well as virtual learning environments (VLEs), have gained attention for their potential to support language learning in formal and informal contexts. This article explores how digital games and VLEs can contribute to second language acquisition by fostering motivation, meaningful interaction, contextualized input, and learner autonomy. This investigation was conducted at the University of Malta and the data gathering processes consist mainly of qualitative semi-structured interviews with seven participants (four EFL undergraduate students, two lecturers of SLA and one lecturer of Language Teaching and Technology), interview transcripts and content analysis techniques which were used to examine and interpret data collected. Drawing on theories of SLA, including input, interaction, and sociocultural perspectives, the paper analyzes the pedagogical affordances of game-based learning and online environments. It also discusses empirical findings, challenges, and implications for educators, ultimately arguing that the integration of games and VLEs, when guided by sound pedagogical principles, can significantly enhance second language learning outcomes.

Keywords: game-based, learning tools, MMORPGs, SLA, VLEs.

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a complex and multifaceted process influenced by cognitive, social, affective, and contextual factors. Traditionally, SLA research and pedagogy have focused on classroom-based instruction, textbooks, and teacher-led activities. However, the rapid development of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the ways in which languages can be learned and taught. Digital games, console games, and virtual learning environments (VLEs) seem to play a central role in the everyday lives of learners, particularly younger generations, offering new opportunities for exposure to and interaction with second languages.

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Digital and console games tend no longer to be viewed merely as entertainment; on the contrary, they seem to be increasingly recognized as powerful learning tools. Accordingly, many commercial and educational games require players to understand instructions, narratives, and dialogues in a second language, often English, thereby providing extensive and meaningful input. At the same time, VLEs such as Moodle, Google Classroom, and other online platforms support structured learning, collaboration, and assessment, extending language learning beyond the physical classroom.
This article aims to investigate how digital and console games, together with VLEs, can improve second language acquisition. By examining theoretical foundations, pedagogical affordances, and empirical evidence, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the potential and limitations of these tools. The central research question guiding this discussion is: *How can digital and console games, along with VLEs, contribute effectively to second language acquisition?*

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted at the University of Malta and the data gathering processes consist mainly of qualitative semi-structured interviews with seven participants (four EFL undergraduate students, two lecturers of SLA and one lecturer of Language Teaching and Technology).
As opposed to the quantitative research that is an experimental investigation formulated on statistics (Jackson *et al.* 2007), the qualitative approach is a social research that analyses people's subjective perceptions of circumstances and facts that are the object of an analysis (Jackson *et al.* 2007).
I took into consideration this scientific methodology since my aim was to have a closer interaction with the interviewees and set in advance the questions that I could ask them. In addition, I considered this approach since semi-structured interviews can have the advantage of allowing the researcher to supply all the information to the participants with regard to the type of research being done. Besides, when interviewees are not native speakers of English, like in this case, the interviewer can re-ask the questions that could be misunderstood or not fully understood (Kumar, 2005). Contrariwise, the disadvantages of this research method could be determined by the ability of the researcher and the length of the interaction which may affect the quality of the data collected (Kumar, 2005).
I discarded the idea of using a focus group and questionnaires because a focus group is still an unstructured interview in which a minimum of five respondents are needed (Kumar, 2014). Taking into account that the teaching context identified for this study has a small number of participants, I came to the conclusion that this approach was not going to be suitable for this investigation.
Likewise, I determined that using questionnaires was not a viable option as I planned to have a face-to face talk with the participants so as to provide them with further explanations regarding the objective of this study along with the nature of their participation in it.
The questions asked in the interviews ranged over the effectiveness of VLEs in order to enhance language learning outcomes when integrated with game-based activities; how VLEs can increase learner autonomy and motivation in SLA through game-based activities; what types of digital and console games learners prefer for L2

learning so as to extend their vocabulary size and how digital and console games impact language learning for learners at different proficiency levels (e.g. beginner, intermediate, advanced).

3. Results

To understand the role of digital games and VLEs in SLA, it is essential to consider key theoretical perspectives that explain how languages are learned.

One of the most influential theories in SLA is Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of exposure to comprehensible input slightly above the learner's current proficiency level (Krashen, 1985). Digital games often provide rich linguistic input through written texts, spoken dialogues, subtitles, and contextual indicators such as images and actions. Because games are interactive and goal-oriented, learners are motivated to understand the input in order to progress, making the input both meaningful and engaging (Gee, 2003).

Interactionist theories highlight the role of interaction and negotiation of meaning in language learning. Multiplayer digital and console games, particularly online games, create environments in which learners must communicate with other players to achieve shared objectives. These interactions can involve asking for clarification, giving instructions, or negotiating strategies, all of which promote language development. Additionally, Swain's Output Hypothesis suggests that producing language helps learners notice gaps in their knowledge, a process that can occur naturally during gameplay and online collaboration in VLEs (Swain, 1985).

From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is viewed as a socially mediated process. Digital games and VLEs provide communities of practice in which learners participate, collaborate, and co-construct meaning. Scaffolding can be offered not only by teachers but also by peers and by the game itself through feedback systems, hints, and adaptive difficulty levels (Weller, 2007).

Digital and console games encompass a wide range of genres, including role-playing games (RPGs), adventure games, simulation games, and multiplayer online games. Many of these genres are particularly rich in narrative and dialogue, exposing learners to authentic or semi-authentic language use. Role-playing games, for example, often require players to read extensive texts, follow complex storylines, and interact with non-player characters, all of which can support vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension (Gee, 2003).

Another crucial factor in SLA is motivation. Games are inherently motivating due to elements such as challenge, competition, immediate feedback, and rewards (Reinders & Wattana, 2015).

Language learning through games can occur both incidentally and intentionally. In many cases, learners acquire vocabulary and expressions incidentally while focusing on gameplay rather than on language itself. However, games can also be intentionally integrated into language instruction, with teachers designing tasks that draw learners' attention to specific linguistic features or skills.

Accordingly, virtual learning environments (VLEs) are online platforms that support teaching and learning through tools such as forums, quizzes, multimedia resources, and collaborative spaces. In the context of SLA, VLEs can offer structured opportunities for input, output, interaction, and feedback (Dillenbourg, 2000).

VLEs seem to facilitate communication through discussion forums, chats, and video conferencing, enabling learners to practice language skills in both synchronous and

asynchronous modes. These tools are particularly valuable for developing writing and speaking skills, as they allow learners time to plan and reflect on their language use.
One of the key advantages of VLEs is their support for learner autonomy. Learners can access materials at their own pace, review content as needed, and take greater responsibility for their learning (Kong, Johnson, 2025). Adaptive learning paths and digital tracking tools also allow for personalized instruction, which can be beneficial in heterogeneous language classrooms. However, the effective use of digital games and VLEs in SLA may require thoughtful pedagogical integration. Games should not be used in isolation but aligned with learning objectives and curricular goals. VLEs can serve as a framework in which game-based activities are contextualized, discussed, and assessed (Kong, Johnson, 2025).
Despite the learner-centered nature of games and VLEs, teachers play a crucial role in guiding, scaffolding, and mediating the learning process. Teachers can design pre- and post-game activities, encourage reflection, and help learners make connections between gameplay experiences and language learning outcomes (Lee & Wu, 2022).
Assessing language learning through games presents challenges, but VLEs offer tools for monitoring progress, collecting learner output, and providing feedback. Formative assessment strategies, such as self-assessment journals or discussion posts, can help capture learning that occurs during gameplay (Kong, Johnson, 2025).
According to Reinhardt and Sykes (2012) game-oriented L2 teaching and learning comes in two forms such as game-based and game-enhanced. On the one hand, the former indicate the games which have been designed for SLA and have been described as instructional targets. On the other hand, a game-enhanced educational setting is defined by the use of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) or commercial off-the-shelf (COTS). It follows that the game-enhanced approach could be linked to "naturalistic CALL" (Benson and Chik, 2011) defined by Chik (2014:835) as "the students' pursuit of some leisure interest through a second or foreign language in digital environments in informal learning contexts."
Studies maintain that English-targeted video games could give EFL learners access to a language immersion experience. This interactive activity provides gamers with exposure to authentic English and assists them in becoming familiar with new words and expressions in different contexts due to the help of visual clues (Gee, 2012: xiv). With this regard, Chen and Yang (2011) conducted a study going through the single-player adventure game *Bone* which demonstrated that a large number of Thai students noticed that not only did gaming help them to develop solid listening comprehension skills but it could enhance their vocabulary size.
With the advent of high-speed internet, more people started playing MMORPGs. This genre of games is typically set in three-dimensional multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) where gamers worldwide interact simultaneously using avatars (virtual representations of themselves). Since the online environment is multinational, games often default to English then the outcome is that MMORPGs can promote English acquisition interactively (Sundqvist and Silvén, 2012).
It is notable that these types of interactions can provide EFL learners with more opportunities to practice the L2 through a task-based approach that could be effective in helping them to improve their intercultural communication skills.
In addition, another advantage of using MMORPGs for foreign language learning is that this method appears to alleviate anxiety levels among students when they use the

TL and this can be attributed to two key aspects specifically the previously mentioned use of avatars and the possibility of delayed communication (Sadler and Dooly, 2014). In simpler terms, in contrast to direct interaction, when gamers engage in simultaneous interactions they have more time to think before giving thoughtful responses and this process can ease the pressure on them. Additionally, using a virtual alter ego might reduce shy and less confident students' fear of making mistakes and it can also help them to develop their communication skills (Sadler and Dooly, 2014).
Likewise, this hypothesis was validated by numerous studies carried out by Reinders and Wattana (2015) who monitored Thai EFL students while gaming MMORPGs *Ragnarok Online*. Their results revealed that not only could the virtual environment decrease ESL learners' anxiety but it also boosted English output.
Hence, not only can the immersive nature of digital games reduce anxiety and lower the affective filter, but it can make learners more willing to take risks in using the second language. This increased engagement often leads to longer exposure times compared to traditional instructional methods (Dörnyei, 2001).
Finally, another benefit of using digital games as didactic instruments is that players are normally consumers and creators of game-based activities namely video tutorials, channels and forums. Considering that these texts target a broad audience, they are usually in English (Chik, 2014) and this leads non-English speakers to train their EFL skills receptively and productively, boosting autonomous learning as well.
Nevertheless, the use of mainstream video games in EFL teaching and learning can have possible drawbacks. One potential issue is that not all computer and console games could be appropriate for EFL learning. Secondly, research indicates that commercial games might lead players to learn game-specific vocabulary which has limited real-world use (Peterson, 2013). Thirdly, it seems that players often prioritize gaming flow over language learning (Chik, 2014; Reinhardt and Sykes, 2012).
Finally, a further disadvantage of MMORPGs concerns the lack of language feedback and the consequence is that students can learn incorrect words and expressions along with wrong grammar structures (Peterson, 2013).

4. Discussion

Within the Italian context outlined in this study, current research on digital gaming in EFL learning is limited indicating a need for more investigation.
Data collected from the 7 interviews has yielded valuable insights, providing a rich foundation for analyzing the research dilemma. As a matter of fact, Italian interviewees suggest that commercial games in English could support learning for high school students.
The key finding from the interviews was that video game play may not be ideally suited to the classroom environment, particularly in Italy where the teaching programs are still rooted in traditional approaches. As a result, although this method could work well for EFL learning outside the classroom, several factors need to be considered to ensure successful learning outcomes. Firstly, while some students are aware that leisure resources can support autonomous learning, they may lack the skills to use them effectively (Bailly, 2011), therefore it is crucial for teachers to guide students in using digital games as useful and efficient learning tools.
Another important point emerging from this research is that not all games fit L2 learning then the most appropriate types must be selected based on students' goals.

Richards (2015) suggests that MMORPGs may be well-suited for independent out-of-class language learning as they immerse players into a virtual interactive space using only English and establishing a connection between Klein's (1986, cited in Wehner, Gump and Downey, 2011) "spontaneous language acquisition" and "guided language learning" (Wehner, Gump and Downey, 2011). Hence, this strategy could greatly benefit Italian learners as English is uncommon in daily contexts since it is seldom used beyond the classroom, as a matter of fact, it can promote EFL learning offering social platforms that enhance language acquisition.

Furthermore, interviews with 4 students showed higher motivation in learning English when immersed in VLEs, with greater exposure to authentic English compared to traditional classroom methodologies and approaches. According to Gardner (2000) motivation is central to L2 learning, influencing failure or success.

Nevertheless, beyond motivation, FL learning outcomes depend on other factors including abilities, cultural and educational relevant variables, effort and language anxiety.

Regarding the latter, language anxiety seems to be one of the main elements which could exert influence on SLA and motivation. In fact, one of the students claimed that he finds gaming less stressful in EFL learning and reduces his anxiety since he uses avatars (virtual personas), avoiding worries about mistakes. This finding supports Self-Efficacy theory (Stajkovic, & Sommer, 2000).

Based on the preceding, findings suggest that the syllabus implemented in Italian high schools concerning ELT that focuses on grammar translation initially and literature later, appears outdated, ineffective and unmotivating for students as it fails to engage them.

Grammar-translation methods can restrict student autonomy, prioritizing grammar rules and translation exercises. The consequence is that with this approach, students passively learn grammar to translate texts, limiting their engagement. Interviews with 2 participants seem to corroborate this hypothesis since the two participants perceive this approach as overly theoretical and ineffective for motivation EFL learning, as it concentrates on reading and writing while sidelining speaking skills.

Conversely, data shows that games and VLEs can yield better results, effectively boosting student interest and motivation engaging them with innovative digital tools. Sunqvist's (2009) argues that effective EFL lessons incorporating video games can enhance vocabulary acquisition, oral fluency and overall student motivation.

As noted earlier, a major benefit of games in EFL is that they significantly reduce learner anxiety, making them valuable learning tools (Richard-Amato, 1988). Accordingly, students feel less anxious about accuracy (Chen, 2005), and are unafraid to make mistakes in front of peers and teachers, increasing their learning motivation. Consequently, game-based classes could foster confidence and spontaneous participation.

Based on the above, it appears that even though digital games and VLEs can offer significant potential, they also seem to present challenges. To clarify, access to technology, digital literacy, and teacher training are critical issues that can limit effective implementation. Additionally, as previously mentioned, not all games are equally suitable for language learning, and excessive focus on gameplay may distract from linguistic objectives if not carefully managed. Besides, as discussed above, a downside of digital games is that they often lack error correction features, risking the acquisition of incorrect language form and then potentially reinforcing mistakes (Peterson, 2013).

Another concern is the need for empirical evidence. Although many studies report positive effects of game-based learning on motivation and engagement, more longitudinal and large-scale research is needed to establish clear causal relationships between game use and language proficiency gains.
Ultimately, taking into account the implications for future research and practice, the evidence suggests that further studies should be done in order to explore how different types of games and VLE features impact specific language skills, such as grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatic competence. There is also a need to investigate how individual differences, including age, proficiency level, and learning styles, interact with digital game-based learning.
For practitioners, professional development is essential to help teachers integrate these tools effectively. When used strategically, digital and console games combined with VLEs can create rich, interactive, and motivating environments that could support second language acquisition.

5. Conclusions

All things considered, the obvious conclusion that could be drawn is that digital and console games, along with virtual learning environments, represent powerful resources for enhancing second language acquisition. Grounded in established SLA theories, these tools provide meaningful input, opportunities for interaction and output, and socially mediated learning experiences. They also foster motivation, engagement, and learner autonomy, all of which are essential for successful language learning.
While challenges remain, particularly in terms of access, training, and assessment, the pedagogical potential of games and VLEs is substantial. When integrated thoughtfully into language education, they can complement traditional approaches and contribute to more dynamic, inclusive, and effective second language learning experiences.

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