Formalizing Casual Tabletop Games for Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Game-based learning has received considerable attention for the teaching of subjects such as Math and Science. For the teaching of foreign languages, however, the field is still in its infancy as the proliferation of gamification topples meaningful and transformative gameful teaching practices. The overuse of gamified quizzes and applications in language education has established games as trivia practices, which sugar-coat the challenging task of language learning through rewards. Although motivating students is an important step to engage them in the learning process, games have the potential to solicit communication and social skills which are much needed in language learning. The paper calls for a game-enhanced approach to language learning, which treats games as authentic materials that immerse students in meaningful communication and teachers in creative practice. Examples of casual, vernacular games are visited and their formal application in the language classroom is discussed in order to meet the mandated foreign language curricula. Formally linking games to curriculum objectives is essential for teachers to appreciate the motivational and pedagogical value of non-educational games and inform their practice creatively.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → **Computer games**; **Education**; *Distance learning*.

KEYWORDS

game-enhanced teaching, gamification, language teaching, board games, vernacular games

1 INTRODUCTION

Games, which are ubiquitous in the youth's reality, are positive motivational and social experiences [8]. Applying games in language teaching, an inherently social and laden with interactions subject, can provide ground for students' growth and teachers' creativity

and professional empowerment [18]. Research and practice have proven the motivational and engaging power of games, but the evidence concerning learning outcomes is not equally definite [15]. Studies have shown that the context where a game intervention or experiment is held and the how the game is applied, play an important role to the success of the intervention [10]. "The idea of *game* rests in the perception of the user, not the description of the developer, the pedagogical model or the label used by the teacher" [2, p.61]. Similarly, if teachers do not realise the pedagogical value of a game, they will be very reluctant in introducing it to their class.

Applying games in an educational setting in a non-principled manner can be detrimental to both students' and teachers' perceptions of its efficiency or usefulness. This paper advocates for a formal application of vernacular games for language teaching and aims to guide language teachers in purposefully applying games for learning purposes. It adopts a game-enhanced approach to language teaching, using commercial games as authentic materials and correlating them to specific learning objectives. The paper's contribution is that it meaningfully ties commercial games to foreign language curriculum objectives, which is a missing link in research and practice.

2 RELATED WORK

This Section draws from related literature to make a case for introducing language teachers to transformative gameful teaching.

2.1 Moving away from gamification

According to Reinhardt [19], gameful teaching can be divided into three broad categories: game-based, game-enhanced or game-informed teaching. The first refers to the use of educational games in the classroom, while the second is about using vernacular games for learning purposes. Game-informed teaching borrows game mechanics and applies them in educational activities, in a similar fashion to gamification [5]. This last approach is the one that is most commonly applied in foreign language settings, e.g. [11].

Gamification is now a buzzword in language teaching; however, the concept is not new. Rewards-based learning, which gamification promotes through game elements (leader boards, points, scores) is one of the oldest approaches to language teaching: behaviorism. The behaviorist approach to learning is founded on repetition, language drills and rewards. Though obsolete, behaviorist practices proliferate in language classrooms [6] and are reincarnated through digital gamified applications such as *Kahoot*[1] and digital gamified quizzes featured in e-books. These applications and online "games" test learners' knowledge on either grammar or vocabulary aspects of the target language rather than help them practice those [2]. Characterized by colorful, engaging and (annoyingly) loud interfaces,

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[1]https://kahoot.com/

gamification fails to provide language teaching with transformative learning experiences that would encourage language production and meaningful communication.

On the other hand, game-based teaching approaches have the potential to solicit social learning, communicative skills and simultaneously shelter the fun aspect of gamification. In game-based approaches, educators can use existing (educational) games or design their own games that satisfy specific learning purposes [22]. There is a plethora of educational digital and tabletop games for teaching subjects such as Math [9] and Science [23], tied to specific learning objectives. However, there are fewer educational games for language learning, a notable instance being *Mingoville* [16]. Teachers' limited pedagogical knowledge of game literacies as found in research is a factor that renders the design or integration of educational games a challenge for them [3]. Applying, however, gamification is a much simpler task for educators, as its principles (i.e.rewards for cultivating a positive behavior and enhancing motivation) have a long history and use in educational settings. The abundance of customizable gamified applications, which are also engaging and attractive to young learners, have also enabled educators to apply digital gamification almost effortlessly in their classes. However, the creation of holistic game experiences with intended learning outcomes still remains a challenge.

Considering the above, this paper advocates that employing a game-enhanced approach incorporates benefits of gamification and game-based learning, while making it easier for educators to explore games as a learning tool. Using a commercially available game in the classroom can facilitate learner motivation, while applying principled learning (focus on meaning, purposeful communication, language focus) and linking the game to learning objectives enables the language teacher to appreciate the pedagogical value of this authentic genre.

The idea of introducing games as authentic materials has been explored before, as part of the Communicative Language Teaching approach [19]. Using authentic games under this approach, usually promotes free-form, incidental and experiential learning with little pedagogical mediation. However, it is necessary to embrace authentic materials with formal activities and link them to objectives so that learning is not incidental and implicit but purposeful and intentional. Formalizing an authentic genre, e.g. a vernacular game, with framing or bridging activities "promotes a learnful disposition towards it" [19, p.143] and can potentially maximize its efficiency. The mandated, standardized foreign language curricula force educators to adopt structured language learning approaches, rather than immersing learners in non-mediated learning. The next Section will provide further evidence on how teachers apply games in the language classroom, and why game-enhanced approaches can be the key to establishing games as meaningful interventions.

2.2 Teachers' use of games in the classroom

Gameful interventions (game-based learning or gamification) have been widely researched from the students' perspective and their impact on learning outcomes and engagement, e.g. [17],[24]. Teachers' attitudes have only lately been investigated, and the field is under-researched when it comes to language teaching. Therefore,

this Section primarily draws from research on teachers' practices and attitudes to games in mainstream education.

Teachers have reported that they use games as individual activities and for a short time [15] or at the end of the lesson as a reward [12]. Digital gamification appeals to language educators for motivating young students and beginners. Moreover, educators do not always find that the available digital games are correlated with the curriculum objectives, or they feel that games (and especially technology) promote shallow engagement rather than deep learning skills [20]. Language teachers, given the interactive nature of the taught subject, favor more constructivist approaches to learning that enable learners to use the language creatively and move beyond the answering-multiple-choices model [21].

It becomes evident that training and teacher education programs on game pedagogies are necessary to enable teachers to meaningfully integrate games in their classroom [7]. Particularly, for language teachers it would be beneficial to delve into the social practice of gameplay and exploit this medium to facilitate meaningful communication in the target language. Balancing the entertaining and learning goal of the games and aligning it with the curriculum is the main challenge for teachers in adopting game-enhanced teaching, which this paper attempts to tackle.

3 METHOD

This paper makes reference to English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching context, with an intended audience of intermediate language learners (A2-B1 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), optimally teenagers. Given the time limits of an EFL class (usually 45-60 minutes) and language teachers' limited gaming literacy as identified earlier, selecting casual tabletop games was deemed appropriate for this setting. Although casual games is a term that predominantly refers to digital games featured through social media platforms, certain tabletop games can also be included under this umbrella. According to Kuittinen et al. [14, p.199] "Casual is so far best defined by the easiness of the game experience in its expanded sense, covering the whole experience from the accessing of a game to playing it". Some commonly mentioned criteria which distinguish casual games are: short length of play, light difficulty of gameplay, accessibility [4].

To identify games that satisfy the above criteria and definition, the Board Game Geek (BGG) website[2] was employed. BGG is an online hub for board game hobbyists; its members have cataloged, categorized and reviewed more than 100,000 tabletop games. For the purposes of this paper, an advanced search was employed on this website: as a game category, the "party game" tag was selected (as it indicates a widely accessible, acceptable, simple game) and was cross-referenced with games of 15-30 minutes of gameplay, and complexity rating of 1-2 (out of 5). The list returned sorted games by number of voters and the first twenty games were considered for this paper. Six games were finally selected from this list, as an indicative sample, by excluding ones with potential violent thematic connotations or battle-themes. These games were then divided into three categories: storytelling, word and role-playing games, based on their core mechanics, as listed on BGG. The six games are summarized in Table 1 and discussed in the next Section.

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[2]https://boardgamegeek.com/

Table 1: Vernacular games and links to curriculum objectives

	Storytelling games	Role-Playing Games	Word Games
Examples	Once Upon a Time, StoryLine	Spyfall, Funemployed	Codenames, Taboo
Mechanics	storytelling, voting	role-playing, acting	communication limits, team-based
Grammar	Past Simple tense, parts of speech	Wh- questions, conjunctions, connectors	relative clauses, synonyms
Vocabulary	fairytales, descriptive adjectives	professions, locations	any, customizable

4 LINKING VERNACULAR GAMES TO LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

This Section describes how six commercial tabletop games, selected via the method described in Section 3, could be used in the language classroom following the curriculum objectives (see Table 1).

4.1 Storytelling games

Once Upon a Time (*OUaT*) (Atlas Games, 1993) is a storytelling card game in which players improvise a fairytale using cards as story elements (e.g. characters, adjectives, places) and drive the story to match a predetermined ending. A similar game is *StoryLine* (Asmodee, 2016); its main difference from *OuAT* is that there are narrative templates which determine what kind of card needs to be played next, e.g. character or place. *StoryLine* is more appropriate for A2 level students as it gives more narrative prompts to evoke stories from the players; conversely, *OuaT* is more unstructured and therefore more suitable for B1 learners and above.

Knowledge of narrative tenses is needed in order to create a story. Storytelling games are thus ideal for teaching and practicing the Simple Past and Past Perfect tenses. Both *OuaT* and *StoryLine* include action verbs as story cards. Before playing the game, the language teacher could deal only the action verb cards to students and elicit the Simple Past and Past Participle form of the verbs and explain any unknown vocabulary. Students could then be asked to create sentences using the dealt cards to describe actions in the past (e.g. personal stories, not necessarily in an effort to create a fairytale). After familiarizing learners with sentence construction to refer to the past, they can then engage in gameplay. Students can first narrate their stories orally and then be invited to write them down in a collaborative or individual fashion (e.g. as homework).

4.2 Word games

A highly ranked word game on the BGG website is *Codenames* (Czech Games Edition, 2015), where players are divided into two teams and have to figure out which word cards (agents) belong to their team, based on a single word clue given by their Spymaster. Another well-known deduction word game is *Taboo* (Hasbro, 1989), where one player gives spoken clues to their team for them to guess the intended word. Both games are team-based and their main mechanic is the communication restrictions, i.e. in *Taboo* players cannot use the words listed on the card, while in *Codenames* only clues of a single word are allowed.

The communication restrictions force players to use language creatively and make abstract connections. Playing such games in a foreign language requires metalinguistic knowledge. Given that the vocabulary included in the commercial games might not always be known to players, language teachers can easily modify these games by choosing or substituting the existing cards with ones that feature vocabulary already acquired by learners, e.g. in [22]. The game still remains a challenge as players have to define, describe or connect newly-taught words using the target language. Vocabulary can easily be practiced and revised through both these games. Grammar skills can also be practiced through *Taboo*. Players can practice the use of relative clauses in order to describe the words to others using sentences such as "it is a place where..." or "we use that when...". Applying language tasks as gameplay can help learners realize the use of complex grammar structures, such as relative clauses, as they are embedded in a authentic, communicative task, i.e. inferring the words from their co-players.

4.3 Role-playing games

Spyfall (Hobby World, 2016) and *Funemployed* (Mattel, 2013) have a common underlying theme: professions, and their common mechanics include acting and role-playing. In *Spyfall*, all players but one know where they are employed and have to identify who the spy is; the spy has to figure the location of the others. Players ask each other questions to infer the needed information. Through *Spyfall* players can practice vocabulary relevant to locations, workplaces, and professions. Prior to playing the game, it would be useful for students to brainstorm vocabulary related to each location or construct word lists that would be accessible to them during gameplay. From a grammar viewpoint, players can practice constructing Wh-questions (e.g. What, Where, When) when taking their turns.

In *Funemployed* players are dealt qualification cards, and have to use these qualifications to convince the player-employer that they are suitable for the job posting announced. As in *Spyfall*, this game can help players practice vocabulary related to jobs, character strengths and competencies. Grammar-wise, players can practice making arguments using conjunctions and connectors, e.g. because, so, therefore. Building convincing arguments is a necessary skill for developing an argumentative or opinion essay, a task required in English to Speakers of Other Languages qualification exams.

4.4 Facilitating casual board gameplay in online learning

While this paper is being written, humanity faces the fatal Covid-19 pandemic. While our hope is that this situation is resolved as soon as possible, this crisis has brought forward the issue of digitizing education. As of now, May 2020, schools have closed for two months in most countries worldwide. With social isolation on the rise, education moves towards online schooling. The dynamics of online learning have brought great change in how languages are taught and educators face new challenges posed by the use of online tools.

It could be argued that the physical distancing measures render social tabletop gameplay almost impossible. However, there are ways in which the games discussed in the previous section could be solicited in online environments with additional pedagogical benefits. There are unofficial web-based versions of *Codenames* [3] where students and teachers can all join a predefined game room from their devices and play the game as if it were on the tabletop. Similar is the case with *Spyfall*, for which unofficial web-based and mobile applications have been created and allow remote gameplay[4]. The additional benefits of playing these two games online is that the platforms allow users to customize the words and language in *Codenames* and the locations and roles in *Spyfall*. Language teachers can take advantage of this aspect and modify the game to include vocabulary which students need to practice. Alternatively, teachers may invite students to design their own game cards, facilitating thus higher order thinking skills of creating and evaluating [13].

As for the storytelling games listed in this paper, there are no digital versions. An alternative would be the Android version of *Story Cubes* (The Creativity Hub, 2005), a storytelling game where players improvise a story based on picture prompts rolled by dice. The language teacher can instruct students to develop a story collaboratively, or in an exquisite corpse manner, using the rolled dice as common prompts. However, this version is most suited for individual or co-located play, as users cannot access the same screen or game room with others. The picture prompts make this game suitable for younger learners and even beginners in the language.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the use of game-enhanced approaches as appropriate for language teachers new to gameful pedagogies. Linking commercial games to language curricula highlights the power of games as authentic, interactive tools that can help learners develop communicative competence and attain specific learning objectives. Areas for future research could be teachers' roles and attitudes in game-enhanced language approaches and students' predispositions towards vernacular games. Investigating the educators' perspective and the classroom experience in depth is essential to applying sound game-based learning pedagogies. This field has advanced in relation to digital games, e.g. [1], and it could be expanded to the application of tabletop games. While regretfully under-represented in this digital day and age, tabletop games are invaluable since they can provide ground for rich interpersonal relationships, build communication skills, and elicit endless creativity from both the educators and students. Familiarizing language educators with vernacular games is the necessary next step before inviting them to design their own game-based interventions [22]. The game industry could also be involved in outlining alternative gameplay of published products for classroom, as Atlas Games has already done for *OUaT*[5]. Establishing sound gameful pedagogical framework online, in blended environments or in classrooms requires teachers' involvement in the design and application of games, and thus further teacher training on games for learning is much needed.

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[3]https://jhil.github.io/kodenames/
[4]https://spyfall.adrianocola.com/
[5]http://blog.atlas-games.com/2013/09/once-upon-time-in-english-class.html

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