# Play Mobile - Digital Game-based Learning with Handheld Devices

The benefits of play for learning are well-known. It offers the chance to develop thinking skills such as problem-solving, social skills like teamwork, and language skills through negotiating strategies, giving instructions, and more. Digital games, however, are often seen to lack the key element of the other player. Quite often (but not always of course) the opponent is the AI and gaming is labelled as a solitary activity.

That has changed in the age of the Internet with video games becoming more and more interactive and complex. This has led to a rise in the interest of game-based learning (GBL) both in general education and in language teaching. These developments have also coincided with an increasing interest in mobile learning. With smartphones and tablets in the hands of many learners in developed countries, the possibilities for engaging in learning seem endless. Or, depending on your point of view, you might say that lots of people are playing Candy Crush without much learning going on at all!
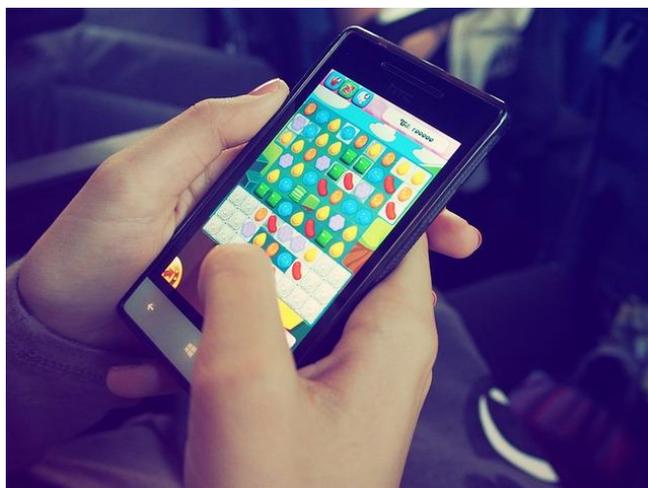
Of course, it is always wrong to think that a device or an app by itself leads to any kind of educational development. With a well-chosen app, however, and a well-thought out series of activities, the engagement and enthusiasm players feel for these games can be harnessed and put to good use in the language classroom. The first thing to consider is that the language does not have to come from the game itself. Just like an intriguing still image or a film without any dialogue, a game does not need much language in it to provide the opportunity to learn. In fact, a minimum of language is often better as it allows the learners space to be creative and generate their own ideas. Another benefit of mobile games is that they are often divided into short levels and are easy to pick up and play, which makes it easier to use them when you only have an hour of class time per day.

Deciding to use gaming apps in class

Mobile devices offer a great way to bring digital games into the classroom. The hardware needed does not take up a lot of space in the way that a PC or console would and students often already own a suitable smartphone or tablet. It may well be the case that your school has

tablets available for use in class. However, this does not mean we have to use mobile devices or games. It is quite possible that some students may simply not be interested. That is why I usually introduce the idea of GBL through conversation. I ask my students if they play digital games, whether they prefer playing on a computer, a gaming console, or a handheld device, and what games they are currently playing. I also ask them if they think gaming could have any benefit for learning. If I get positive responses, that is when I suggest we try some lessons based around apps. With the students are interested, the whole process becomes much easier.

Choosing gaming apps to use in class

They are a few considerations when choosing app games for your lessons. First of all, they should be cross platform, especially if you are facilitating mobile learning on a BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) basis. Even if you have access to class tablets, apps that work on multiple devices are better so that students can also look at them in their own time.

Secondly, they should be free. Asking students to pay for apps, especially if they are not going to use them for more than a few activities is not a good idea. In the case of school apps, there may be issues about purchasing multiple licences so free is generally better.

You will also want to consider the content of the game. Always check for any bad language or graphic content that may be unsuitable for learners because of their age or personal preferences. Use of in-game ads is also something to look out for as is 'pay to unlock' content. Many games with these premium features can still be used without paying, but we should still make sure our students and/or school are aware of what they are downloading.

New games are being released all the time so it is impossible to provide a definitive list of which games to use. My favourites for the classroom include **_Cut The Rope_**, **_Survive_**, and **_Can You Escape?_** but it is worth regularly checking the App Store and Play Store for chart-topping free games. Even better, ask your students what they are playing.

Ideas for using gaming apps in class

There are many ways apps can be put to use in class. Here are a few things I have done with various classes including children and teens:

1. Live commentary

The first time we use a game in class, I usually take the lead. I introduce the game, find out what the students know about it and we then identify any useful vocabulary either from the screen or from screenshot images if it is not immediately apparent. I then play though the level describing what I am doing as I go. I may ask the learners to play along as I do or to listen and

watch and then attempt the level themselves. This results in a language rich live listening activity (Stanley, 2012), often without the students realising it!

2. Help, I'm stuck!

For the next level, it is time to turn the tables as I start the level but then get stuck and ask for help. This naturally generates a lot of language of advice, suggestion, and instruction which can be expanded upon later. It also transfers the control of the lesson to the students with the teacher becoming the recipient of the information. They construct the advice together, negotiate meaning and get to teach the teacher at the same time.

Moving on: Level 2

▸ I'm a little stuck on this level. Help me out!

3. Using online walkthroughs

Every popular game these days has a lot of online content. Google the name of any mobile game and you will find questions, advice, and complete guides in both text and visual formats often generated by the players themselves. This can be a great source of authentic input for our classrooms. Having played through a couple of levels together, I send groups of learners online in search of solutions for the next level. They must find it, process it, and then return to the game and put their new-found knowledge to use. This can be an incredibly engaging and productive activity using and processing a large amount of authentic language again without the students ever realising it.

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4. Gap-fill walkthroughs

There are other ways these walkthroughs can be adapted for use in class if you want to give your learners more of a challenge or offer more support for lower levels. Guides to the level may be presented in the form of gap-fills. It is then the students' task to find the right words to complete the instructions. This may be done before playing and then using the game to check answers (Mawer, 2013) or while playing with learners filling in the answers as they play through. This provides a great way to get them focused on specific vocabulary.

5. Misleading walkthroughs

Another activity that challenges learners to analyse walkthrough text more closely is to give them one you have prepared with deliberate mistakes in it. This may take the form of presenting the wrong colour, a completely false instruction or steps for completing the level in the wrong order. The task the groups then have is to play through the level and identify the misleading parts of the walkthrough. During play, they can highlight the errors and note down the correct version before writing the fully functioning walkthrough as a follow-up task.

(Adapted from an idea by [David Gatrell](#))

6. Retelling and reviewing

Once the students have played through several levels, they are some more productive activities for them to engage in to put all of the language the game has generated to use. The most obvious one is for them to write their own walkthrough to a level. While playing, they can note down how they completed the level and then produce a series of written steps. Different groups should then compare their walkthroughs, looking for any differences in content and giving feedback on language use.

Good games invite the player into a narrative. This may be a running narrative in the game or it may be one of the player's own construction. Either way, it makes for a great foundation for creative writing. Ask your students to tell the story of the game from the perspective of the main character (if there is one) or themselves inside the game. Ask them to create their own narrative using the game as a backdrop. If it has captured their imaginations, the ideas will flow.

SCORESHEET *SURVIVED*
NORMAL (easiest with extra gear)
DAYS IN THE WILDERNESS
28
MILES TRAVELED
89
BETA UPDATE 139
WWW.THESURVIVEGAME.COM

PLAYTIME: 139 min
LOCATIONS VISITED: 13
FORAGED: 79 times
COLLECTED WOOD: 44 times
HUNTING ATTEMPTS: 12
TRAPS PLACED: 32
CAUGHT FISH: 8
STARTED RESTING: 29 times
CAMPFIRES STARTED: 39

CONTINUE TO MAIN MENU

After getting a good feel for the game, the class can also write a review of the game. Show them examples of online reviews as a model and then ask them to write their own. These can range from a star rating out of five with a short comment for lower level learners to a more detailed description of the strengths of the game and what could be improved for higher level

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students. For an extra level of authenticity, these reviews could be shared on a class blog or even posted online.

Digital games offer a high level of engagement for people of all ages and well-designed games can provoke moments of critical thought and learning. Mobile devices add the advantage of the app being easily accessible and actually in the learners' hands. Add a carefully designed lesson into the mix and there is a lot of powerful potential for generating language and interacting with it.

References

Mawer, K.2013. 'A Christmas Game Gap-Fill' Retrieved from http://www.digitalplay.info/blog/2013/12/12/a-christmas-game-gap-fill/

Stanley, G. 2012. 'Focus on genres: Escape the room games' Retrieved from http://www.digitalplay.info/blog/2012/05/04/focus-on-genre-escape-the-room-games/

Bio

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This article was originally published in in TESOL France Teaching Times in November 2015.