IDENTITY THROUGH GAMING IN THE L2 CLASSROOM: CONTEXTUALIZATION AND NARRATIVE

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From my first moments of teaching French, I have held a deep desire to motivate learners and to connect them with the language. The bond built between a student and a language creates and supports a special kind of motivation, paving the way for learning and growth not just linguistically but also as an individual. As the trimester moves forward, too, we instructors see this growth and, in tandem, the student's sense of self or identity. After all, identity and language meet each other hand-in-hand. For example, I have been observing the use of nonbinary and gender-neutral forms of words so that students who don't conform to the binary feel welcome. In French class, this might look like a student using words like the subject pronoun 'iel' (instead of using the binary 'il' or 'elle') or like nouns such as *'acteurice'* (instead of using 'acteur' or 'actrice'). Similarly, in a Spanish class, perhaps a student from Argentina chooses to use the term *'latine'* to describe themselves rather than latino/latina. In addition to providing and supporting linguistic modes of self-expression, it is also worth exploring ways in which students can explore identity in the classroom.

One avenue that I have found to be quite fruitful in this arena and that I would recommend to other language instructors is the use of video games as an outlet for identity creation and discovery. This is due to the fact that the students, as players, can make more space for themselves (both inside and outside of the classroom) through embodied and contextualized experiences. A video game has the natural ability to drop players into a created digital context. Perhaps they are positioned as a disruptive goose, causing havoc among the locals (*Untitled Goose Game*). They could be tasked with trying to covertly take over the world as an evil mastermind (*Evil Genius*), or maybe they're handed infinite tools to create a virtual avatar and home of their own design, monitoring the intended success or failure of their creations (*The Sims*).

No matter the content, the virtual world requires the player to discover their character as well as their surroundings conceptually and spatially through creation, decision-making, and storytelling.

Experiencing New Identities

Each game offers a unique experience for the players. One game may provide opportunities to become something which they might not otherwise find to be immediately accessible. In this way, video games offer players the chance to explore identities which they might not initially consider themselves to be aligned with. They put themselves in the position of someone who has certain life experiences, challenges, and characteristics. In other words, they take on the identity of the character that they play as. This exposure to various ways of life and cultures offers an introspective comparison of how players perceive or experience the world and how others do the same. James Gee, in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2007) offers some more insight via his Cultural Models Principle which states, "Learning is set up in such a way that learners come to think consciously and reflectively about some of their cultural models regarding the world, without denigration of their identities, abilities, or social affiliations, and juxtapose them to new models that may conflict with or otherwise relate to them in various ways" (p. 226). It is precisely this juxtaposition that provides players (or students) the opportunity to understand others. Recently, Arienne Ferchaud et al. conducted a study which aimed to reduce the stigma around mental health by attempting to build a sense of identification with an avatar/character with psychosis (Senua) within the carefully researched and constructed (in reference to the creators' constant work with mental health professionals) video game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2020).

During the study, participants either played or watched others play the first 45 minutes of the game and were asked for their perceived sense of identification with Senua as well as their desire to distance themselves socially from those with mental illnesses. Consequently, after playing the game or watching others play, participants showed a lower desire to socially distance from those with mental illnesses. This demonstrates that by taking on certain identities and learning how others live, we can empathize with them, and it affects how we engage with people within a certain community. Similarly, in 2018, Ali Soyoof and Mohammed Jokar conducted a case study that focused on Iranian EFL students' acquisition and acceptance of English language and cultural differences after having them play various video games in English. It was discovered that the students were more accepting and understanding of English customs and practices, and the culture shock the students felt was reduced.

Extending One's Identity to the Virtual Space

Experiencing identities different from one's own is certainly powerful. Just as powerful, however, is the way in which video games allow players to project their own identity into a virtual space and live more freely and, perhaps, more safely. Many video games, usually those in the genre of RPGs (Role-Playing Games) grant players the space to express themselves in ways that they want to explore more and/or might not otherwise feel safe expressing (e.g., creating a non-binary character in a safe video game space). Some games could provide them with a relatable protagonist and/or setting such as being a heritage speaker of Spanish in a bilingual and multiracial household (Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales). If we can recognize these valuable tools of contextualization in video games and use them to create a space for all students' identities to be built and cared for, we can also motivate students and develop a deeper connection with them in the language classroom. This arena is relatively new in the field of language learning and video games. Because of this, there are many studies that can be performed to fill in the gaps. While I will shortly offer a study of my own to help understand the place of video games for identity creation in language classrooms, it is important to know what kinds of identification there are.

Types of Identification

In the realm of game-studies and psychology, the concept of identifying with your avatar (or any observed character), which will be referred to as player-avatar identification, has been studied and broken down into various categories. The most relevant ones to be discussed here are similarity identification, embodied identification/presence, wishful identification. Each of these evokes a sense of identification that will impact the player's experience in a meaningful way.

Originally described by Hoffner and Buchanan in 2005, Van Looy et al. describe *similarity identification* as a feeling that "relates to the experience during the time of media exposure and refers to the process whereby an individual puts themselves in the place of a character and vicariously participates in their experiences" (2012, p. 202). It is essentially the feeling of becoming one with the avatar or that the avatar is an extension of the player whenever they experience something in the game. This seems to be an expansion of Biocca's theory in 1997, which focuses on a physical similarity, that "graphic visualization of the self in a digital environment would allow an individual to construct both a physical and mental model of the self that could be reflected on". No matter the model, though, what is crucial here is that the players equate the avatar with themselves and adopt the experiences and characteristics of the avatar as their own or vice-versa. This is especially the case when it comes to non-competitive games or genres (e.g., Trepte and Reinecke, 2009 and 2010; Klimmt, Hartmann, and Frey, 2007) like simulation games, sandbox games (a game which encourages free play with minimal to no rules) and the like.

Embodied identification or presence is "the emotion of being embodied in the character" (Van Looy et al., 2012). They experience the gaming world through the eyes of their avatar, and they develop a mental connection to the virtual space. It is the feeling of existing in the virtual environment. This concept is made obvious to those who play VR games or watch

users of VR reacting to the experience. As they navigate the virtual space, many users will express emotions appropriate to the VR setting, even if the virtual space does not reflect their immediate, physical surroundings or experiences. For example, VR rollercoasters that make users believe that they are hundreds of feet above the ground will cause them to scream even though they are mere feet from the floor. Horror VR games cause players to scream and fall to the ground in fear. It is presence that deals with gamers believing (or not) that what they are experiencing in the game is happening to them in real life. VR can make a user believe that something not actually occurring is real, dangerous, exciting, and personal.

An extension of embodied identification is wishful identification, which "designates a process that can extend beyond the viewing situation and that involves a desire of the audience member to be (more like) the media character" (Konijn et al., 2007). It is not farfetched to suggest that many people have found a character in one medium or another whom they feel they want to be more like. In the case of wishful identification, this "likeness" can refer to the physical sense (e.g., copying a haircut seen in a video game set in the year 2077, *Cyberpunk* 2077) or in a way that reflects a desire to share a likeness to someone's character (e.g., Captain America's ethical or moral values). This is akin to similarity identification, but instead of comparing the similarity between the observer and the observed, it is the desire of the observer to become more like the observed.

Identification formation is one of the strongest characteristics of video games. No matter the category, identification leads to some of the most meaningful gains for this medium. Games can connect you to other players, give you a sense of identity among groups, with certain portrayed characters, encourage changes in behavior to match someone you admire, and it helps to build community outside of the game as well. Pulling video games into the L2 classroom, therefore, gives us the potential to provide safe spaces in which our students can represent themselves or see some part of themselves represented.

Gaming and Narrative

Video games' inherent skill for empowering players comes from contextualization and game mechanics, but more specifically, it ties closely with the game's narrative. A player's ability to engage with a story is what brings feelings of connection and motivation to life. To understand the effects of narrative on a gamer's experiences, it is necessary to introduce a game's intrinsic forms of narration. According to Salen and Zimmerman, who do not choose to separate narrative from video games, stating that it is not "*if* games are narrative but *how* they are narrative" (2005, p. 379), there are two types of narrative we should take note of. The first of these is 'embedded narrative', which "is pre-rendered narrative content that exists in a final form before a player's interaction with the game" (Neville, 2010, p. 455). These are commonly, and more recently, characterized by cutscenes, not unlike the image above taken from a scene from Death Stranding. However, in older games, where the technology afforded to companies was not as advanced, not utilized, or simply not invented yet, this embedded narrative was created through written (and occasionally dubbed) dialogue. Nevertheless, despite the form of the embedded narration itself, the point remains the same: a story has been created for players, and it delivers an undeviating narrational experience. Put differently, as explained by Neville, it "provides the kind of narrative experiences that linear media forms such as cinema provide" (2010, p. 455).

In contrast to embedded narrative, which essentially disallows users to impact or alter said story, 'emergent narrative' grants players the chance to create and/or build a narrative of their own. Neville describes it as a form of narration that "occurs in unexpected and uniquely different ways when the player interacts with the underlying rules of a game system" (2010, p. 455). Within the video game industry over the last few decades, we have begun to see increasing quantities of video games that implement this style of narration. There has also been a diversification of the ways in which it fulfills its obligation to provide dynamic narrative. Now, the player may choose how to respond to other characters or, through textual choice, how to (re)act. They are given the opportunity to improvise or fulfill one of many possible outcomes.

Some games, such as the interactive drama horror game *Until Dawn* (2015) count on this function (a function which allows for the game to implement what is commonly known as the 'butterfly effect') to build suspense and to improve or decrease the player's chance of survival in various dangerous trials.

Embedded narrative has the capacity to immerse players into a character's life and world. *The Legend of Zelda* series is a good example of an embedded narrative game which provides Link's (the protagonist's) backstory, lays out a storyline, and requires players to complete that storyline to complete the game. Despite the linear mode, however, the game provides cutscenes and dialogues between characters which aid the player in understanding Link's identity as well as his relationship to those around him.

While embedded narrative can certainly foster a sense of identification via taking on the identity of the protagonist, the emergent form of narration in video games empowers the player by granting them the ability to construct an identity that they wish to build themselves instead of having it handed to them. Additionally, this sense of identification can be achieved whether or not certain choices or actions are representative of the player and their innermost selves. In fact, direct similarity between avatar and player may not be as essential for identification in the world of video games as it is to have those choices available to the player in the first place. Bowey et al. (2019), in their study on identification through dialogue, indicated that a player's moral choices, when opposing each other (moral vs immoral), resulted in the highest amount of identification and transportation whether or not those choices reflected the participants' day-to-day personality (p. 1). This is because players desire the opportunity to develop different kinds of avatars and to build unique identities within the game world.

Classroom Application / A Pilot Study

Bringing the discussion back to the classroom, we can ask ourselves what opportunities we are giving our students to engage with a story or to create a story of their own.

If identification and self-expression are empowered through storytelling, how can we maximize student's exposure to various narratives or, at least, their capacity to create their own narratives.

I accidentally stumbled across the answer to this question in March of 2020 which was the month when I had intended to begin a study where students would use The Sims Mobile app in addition to their textbook to help learn French vocabulary and grammar. Of course, this was also the month during which much of the world went into isolation due to COVID. While I collected the data for the study as best as I could given the circumstances, I quickly discovered that a quantitative study would not do and that I would need to shift the study's focus to reflect interesting qualitative findings. While this pilot study's purpose was not to answer questions about identification and narration, it nevertheless resulted in interesting findings regarding how students chose to create their avatars in the game and create a narrative for them. The related findings are presented in one of the in-class activities in particular (Sims App Activity 1), where students were required to make their sims complete a list of actions, take photos of the sims performing the actions, and then write a few sentences to construct a story of their sims' daily routine. Below, we will see two students' work. We will call these students "Jane" and "John." Jane's work will be presented first.

Jane's work provides an example of how players of a video game will often build an avatar that is similar to who they are in the "real" world. While there is no recorded data of the physical characteristics of the participants to corroborate any matching aesthetics, there is, at the very least, a matching name (which has been altered here to protect the participant's identity) and a sim whose given gender matches Jane's stated gender (according to her background information). "Jane" matched her name and gender to her avatar, demonstrating her interest in visualizing herself in a virtual form. For Jane, similarity between her avatar and herself was key, so *similarity identification* was the feeling and the objective. We can observe from her matching details that Jane wanted to see herself projected in the game, completing various tasks. For her, video games are a tool for experiencing things.

Image 1: Jane's Sim Narration

	Mon sim, Jane, se couche à onze heures du soir. *My sim, Jane, goes to bed at 11 o'clock at night.*
	Après, elle se lève à six heures du matin. *After, she gets up at 6 o'clock in the morning.*
	À dix heures du matin, elle prend une douche. Dans la douche, elle se rase les jambes et les bras. *At 10 o'clock in the morning, she takes a shower. In the shower, she shaves her legs and arms.*
	Puis, elle s'assied sur le canapé. Après vingt-cinq minutes, elle s'endort sur le canapé dans le salon. *Then, she sits on the couch. After 25 minutes, she falls asleep on the couch in the living room.*

Below, we will observe John's work which is starkly different from Jane's. For his gaming experience, John chose to replicate the fictional character "Shrek" from the Shrek movie franchise. He designed the avatar to match Shrek physically, presenting as a being with green skin and no hair with a larger build. His writing also focused on detailing those physical characteristics, stating for example, "Il ne se brosse pas les cheveux parce qu' il n'a pas des cheveux" (He doesn't brush his hair because he doesn't have any hair). This shows a user's potential desire to see themselves represented in a whole new way, or rather, a way in which they explore what it would be like to look or act like someone or something else (in this case, as a fictional, green ogre). In other words, John held a sense of wishful identification as he imagined a day in an ogre's life. John's perspective is one of identity exploration as opposed to one of identity reflection.

Image 2: John's Sim Narration

	**Mon sim, Shrek, se réveille à six heures du matin.** *My sim, Shrek, wakes up at 6 o'clock in the morning.*
	**Après, il se douche pour dix minutes. Il n'oublie pas se laver derrière ses oreilles.** *After, he showers for 10 minutes. He never forgets to wash behind his ears.*
	**Ensuite, il se brosse les dents. Il ne se brosse les cheveux pas parce qu'il n'a pas des cheveux.** *Next, he brushes his teeth. He doesn't brush his hair because he doesn't have any hair.*
	**Puis, il s'habille. Il ne porte rien sur sa tête parce qu'il a une belle tête verte.** *Then, he gets dressed. He doesn't wear anything on his head because he has a beautiful green head.*

Whether a student decided to build an avatar based on who they present as or wish to present as, with the help of this video game, they were given a chance to create something of their own and to write about their sim's imagined life (emergent narrative). While this study was not primarily intended to capture a complex look into identification through video games, it certainly poses an interesting question concerning the potential future use of video games to capture and reflect on students' identity in the language classroom. Video games, after all, have afforded players (and teachers alike) tools to contextualize learning and explore a potentially new sense of self or a "self" that can be explored safely in a virtual space through avatar and narrative design. The field of video games and language learning is relatively new, but it is certainly changing as the field progresses, especially given the creation of virtual reality, new gaming technology, and new games, the possibilities for L2 classroom incorporation seem endless, and the hope to see an increase in students' motivation and self-expression appears to be fruitful in the future.

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