

What the Pandemic Can Teach Us About Games in Second Language Classrooms

By Dr. Kurt Squire, University of California, Irvine

Kurt Squire is a professor in the Department of Informatics at UC, Irvine and co-director of the Games + Learning + Society Center at UC, Irvine. Dr. Squire's research interests are in theories and approaches to game-based learning. He has authored over 100 scholarly works on learning technologies and has directed 17 educational software projects. One of his books is Video Games and Learning. As a featured speaker at KOTESOL 2022, Dr. Squire will be speaking about learning language through games. This article touches on how the pandemic has contributed to this. — Ed.

The pandemic has been tough on all of us. Educators have reconceptualized our classrooms, learned new technologies, and shouldered emotional burdens for our students – all on top of the personal challenges we face.

Zoom fatigue is real, and online learning technologies alienate many of us. With Canvas, we are not really “in class,” and we’re not really at “home,” either. It feels like the worst of both worlds.

A consensus is emerging that face-to-face instruction works better than online learning, and it’s probably true. Still, I noticed that throughout the pandemic, my kids, who loathed



online school, loved gaming with friends online. What about game experiences makes them so different from “traditional” e-learning? How might we improve online or blended learning environments based on these differences?

One part of the answer is obvious: They are video games! They are fun. But what about the design of games *makes* them so compelling? Researchers have studied this for decades and find broad agreement around the following themes: (a) *Action*, or making things go “boom”; (b) *Social*, or playing together; (c) *Mastery*, or practicing and strategizing to realize command over a system; (d) *Achievement*, or completing all of one’s goals and tasks; (e) *Immersion*, or pretending to be someone else, somewhere else, and (f) *Creativity*, or making things (Quantic Foundry, 2019). We might examine our curriculum through these lenses to identify ways to improve our online classes.

1. *Agency and Choice*. First, video games are play, which we do *voluntarily*. No one forces us to play games. Research studies show that the moment we are compensated to do something, our desire to do it goes down. Similarly, psychologists are finding that practices like mindfulness meditation are most effective when people do engage them voluntarily. We might re-examine our curriculum and insert opportunities for choice when possible.

2. *Progress Through Clear Goals, Constant Feedback*. Existing gamified learning tools can and do allow students to “level up” at their own pace. Tools such as *Duolingo* saw dramatic increases in usage over the pandemic as people sought new ways to “level up” skills while in quarantine. *Clearing goals* is naturally motivating, and the source of “dopamine bumps” (related to *mastery* and *achievement* motivations). Gamifying an entire curriculum so that it is personalized is possible, but a simpler approach might be to give credit to students who use language learning tools such as *Duolingo* for basic skills practice.

3. *Embracing Media Outside the Class*. Practicing second language skills through *immersion* in media – watching television, listening to music, or now, playing games – is common. Research shows that time spent with second language media predicts success on tests of vocabulary. Many gamers embrace familiar, “cozy” games (like *Animal Crossing*) that are designed to produce warm, reassuring feelings for the purpose of language learning. One might assign a media immersion experience in which students complete a game in a second language as a course assignment.

4. *Creating Co-presence*. Tools such as Canvas support the thinnest of *social* co-presence. Students cannot see who is logged on, cannot correspond in real time, and cannot establish private channels of communication. Many students joined Discord servers during the pandemic to get around these limitations. Teachers might create sanctioned Discord servers or embrace technologies like *Minecraft*. Second language teachers such as Glen Irvin in Wabasha-Kellogg High School have reported success making language learning servers where everyone plays *Minecraft* in a second language.

5. *Augmented Reality Games*. As schools closed during the pandemic, opportunities existed to rethink what the classroom was. What if students learned science by studying the birds outside their windows? What if students practiced second language skills by seeking speakers of those languages and visiting shops or stores? Using location-based mobile games like *Pokémon Go* as a model, second language educators like Julie Sykes have designed games where students complete quests by using language skills in the real world.

Conclusion. The pandemic has revealed real limitations with our digital tools for learning. Tools exist for posting documents, completing quizzes, or video presentations. It is harder, however, for students to *do* things together. Second language *Minecraft* servers are not perfect, but they exemplify everything missing from today’s learning tools. They are a *place* where students can *go, together, to create things* and solve problems in an immersive world. We do not necessarily need technologies to address these challenges. However, signs point toward a future of more blended learning, and employing these techniques might improve the learning experience for everyone.