



Ludic by Design: Integrating Digital Games into an ESL Curriculum to Foster Engagement and Joy

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Short Summary:

This paper reflects on my year-long praxis as a temporary lecturer in an ESL course for the Language Teaching program at the Federal University of Viçosa. To enhance the curricular requirements, I integrated a “Ludic topic” with digital games, designing activities that engaged students both within and around games (York et al, 2021). A post-term questionnaire revealed students’ perceptions: enhanced speaking confidence, collaborative learning, and joyful engagement emerged as key benefits, with many noting how games contextualized language practice. Challenges included passive participation in group settings and occasional misalignment between game mechanics and linguistic goals. Students suggested diversifying game types, pre-class surveys to align with interests, and extending gameplay across multiple sessions to deepen language exploration. Their feedback underscores the potential of LLP to balance curricular rigor with affective, meaningful, student-centered learning.

Constraints plus the who and what of the teaching context

Context (Where do you work? What kind of institution? What is your role? etc.)	Languages Department at a Federal University - Public institution. Entirely free, but there's higher expectations on learning outcomes and excellency. I'm a temp lecturer of English as Second Language (L2) - with an elective on “language teaching and technology”.
Students (goals, wants, needs, knowledge, skills, hobbies, hates, worries)	Mostly young adults (see data below), teachers-to-be, intermediate-advanced language learners. Instead of pen and paper, they mostly use tablets, phones and pdfs. They all have their own styles and backgrounds. Their lingering question is “What will become of me after graduating?”
How much freedom do you have? (What can you do? What can't you do? Why? Who do you need to ask? What will they say?)	A lot. Curriculum? Besides a recommended textbook and topics to be discussed, I can change the way that I teach something based on whatever works best for the class. No need to talk with the administrative body. Tests? I write my own, and I choose to select interesting and contextualized themes for it. - This doesn't mean it's free for all. Students can escalate any issues to the department head or student-driven organizations. - And, as a temporary lecturer, I cannot participate on committees or ask for



	grants, or any other teaching body decisions. It's mostly a teaching position.
Language (goals) (the goals of your course or curriculum, what you must teach, what you want to teach, what students need to know, etc.)	<p>The classes shown here were from a course of "English Language IV" and "English Language V". Topics range from "the present perfect tense" passing through the "passive voice" and "relative clauses". (A2 - B2 IELTS).</p> <p>I wanted to add a more meaningful experience (as in, a new view into the ways that language teaching is deeply related to teacher and learners' own context) to the classes, so I added a "ludic topic" to the classes schedule. At the end (or beginning) of each textbook unit, I would dedicate a class to play/do something with a (digital) game.</p> <p>There were smiles and intrigued faces whenever I walked through the corridors with a game controller in hand.</p>

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How do you create SPACE in the methods, materials and mediation of your teaching and learning playground?

	Methods	Materials	Mediation
Safe: learning from failure, inclusive, competence, supportive	A topic review class prior to any test. Give voice to students' worries and needs (be it about the classes or not). Show the humane in "humanities".	A teacher that recognizes how challenging academia – and language learning – can be. Classes plan as shared document that students could check prior to each class or test	I listened to their needs and the things that happened to them. Class planning could be changed per request of all students. Made a secure environment to allow themselves to express their feelings.
Participation: society, community, choice, self-direction, culture	- Group work in-class. - In-person participation was not connected to grading. - No prizes, whatsoever. I want to foster golden teaching moments (Lunenberg et al, 2007).		Community-building efforts: Group photos, "party" classes, class-suggested themes to study.
Agency: autonomy, freedom, dialogue, interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Online (async) deliveries of homework and projects via a moodle platformAll materials for the classes are available beforehand, along with each class theme and topic.Slides are made available after each class.		



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Late deliveries had softer grading penalties. • Seek a common goal in the chosen games; Avoid using competitive games (or at least using the ones with group cooperation); 	
Critical: challenge, reflective, interdisciplinary, purposeful	<p>On every class: Why are we learning this? Is it useful to you? Is it useful to society?</p> <p>Why do you want to become a teacher? What is our fight? How do we win against prejudice and inequality?</p> <p>PedML practices (New London Group, 1966; Cope, Kalantzis, 2015), along with Freire's ideas on Epistemological Curiosity (Freire, 2011).</p> <p>Critical thinking materials: world news, tweets, things that happened in the city; games as a reflex (or contrast) of society.</p>	
Experiences: relatedness, identity, relevant, meaningful	<p>I give examples on my own learning process and my own life as an undergrad at the university, along with the experiences that made me be where I am now.</p> <p>I foster the understanding that not all teaching is perfect, and that even with good MMM, things might not work as planned.</p>	

On every class:
Why are we learning this? Is it useful to you? Is it useful to society?

The teaching and learning

What we do (teaching and learning)	What is the result (learning/outcomes/actions)
The classes` plan (with a ludic topic) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are eager to try new things (and they explicitly ask about it!). • Help students organize their own lives around what they need to be prepared for. • Compels me (the teacher) to actually work and research ways to integrate those games. • Sometimes, even students that were not enrolled in the classes would come to watch and play.
My goals for integrating games on my classes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing new ways to teach with different game genres • Adapting, overcoming, not accepting the norm as the way that things should only be done (Is there really only one way for teaching this? How could I improve? Will my students like it?) • Creating a new generation of critical-thinking, creative, inventive teachers. 	



The actual classes and activities

The following is a brief explanation of the methods and procedures of each class, followed by links to the classes or to the websites and games used. A rough estimate of the time spent on planning and gameplay is included.

English IV (2024-1):

- Class 5 - [Akinator](#)

Planning time - less than 10m. Play time - 10- 15m (a game for warming-up the class)

- Just play
- Point out insights on the vocabulary and grammatical structure used during/after gameplay.

- Class 6 - [Papers, Please](#)

Planning time - 30m to 1 hour. Explaining rules, game origin, etc: 10-20m. Play time: 30 - 50m (lots of replayability and debriefing)

- Adaptation of the game into a physical setting
- Imagination play: Students were given fake “passports” and had to enter the “country” (classroom) by being asked specific questions about their identity (random students were assigned as inspectors).
- Analysis of language usage on each game turn + overall conceptions at the end.

- Class 12 - [Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes](#)

Planning time - 30m to 1 hour. Explaining rules, presenting vocabulary, etc: 20m - 30m.

Play time: 45m (or as long as they want!)

- Overt game instruction before playing
- Play the game: Class is divided into groups of 5; one student goes to the computer, while the others look for clues in the printed manual.
- Monitor L2 speaking output during each turn.
 - It was common to see students relying on the first language in the beginning, but on a second run, they got confident in using L2 communication.

- Class 15 - [Fallout Series](#) + [Two rooms and a boom](#)

Planning time - 1h to 1h:30 (Lots of research for this one). Explaining game rules, 10m.

Play time: 30m (Keep in mind that the class itself is 1h:40m long! 30m is for the game itself.)

- Social, historical and critical analysis of the 50's America and its portrayal in the Fallout game series;
- Students worked with textual materials around the game – wikis, screenshots, the TV show.
- “Two rooms and a boom” was played to foster spontaneous communication, while keeping in the same context of the class.

- Class 19 - [Gartic Phone](#)

Planning time - 5m (Just choose a theme). Explaining game rules, 5m (not much to do here). Play time: 20m(On bigger classrooms – more than 10 students – consider customizing the game for only 4 or 6 turns, otherwise it takes too long to end).



- This was a class focused on vocabulary learning. The post-game overview allows for a moment of reflection and feedback on their writing/sentence structuring.

English V (2024-2)

- Class 5 - [Stray](#)

Planning time - 1h:30 (Besides downloading, adjusting settings and controllers). Explaining game rules, 5m. Play time: around 15m (The game itself is not the focus, only the discussion that can happen about it.)

- One of my “Halloween month” classes
- Pre-game communicative topics
- During-game grammatical/comprehension activity sheet based on the character’s actions and game environment.

- Class 7 - [Slenderman](#)

Planning time - 1h:30 (Download game assets, spread around the building, designing activities, running the game...).Explaining game rules, 5m. Play time: 10m for the game itself; 20m for hunting pages around.

- Discussion on “creepypastas” and the “slender man” myth
- Grammar activities between discussions and gameplay
- The original game was played as a way to experience the new before transferring it to a physical setting.
- The actual paper sheets of the game (along with a sequence of sentences related to the class) was printed and hidden in the corridors of the language department building (the classes were at night, so it became extra scary)
- Students needed to find all the pages before running out of time.

- Class 10 - [Bioshock](#)

Planning time - 2h (Watching the first level of the game, taking screenshots, creating alternative endings...)Play time: whole class (We used the game’s plot to create activities and explain language around it.)

- Created a “choose your own adventure” type of class. Students read the story and tried to find the correct directions to progress. Each slide allowed for a moment of discussion on which direction was the right one.
 - Listening, writing and grammar activities were integrated with the other parts of the gameplay, culminating in the “would you kindly” dialogue of the game.

- Class 13 - [Planetés](#)

- Printed the worksheets and followed the game instructions:
- Planning time - 15m (The flyer says “it’s intended to be played without any prior preparation”. Now I think it just meant no extra materials to print or use).
- Explained game rules as instructed by the flyer (on each turn).
- Play time: whole class (Had to finish it early because there was no time to replay certain parts.)

- Class 16 - [The Sims 2](#)



Planning time - 1h (Playing the game to get some screenshots, planning the activities around it) Play time: 20m (Just enough to create a character with students.)

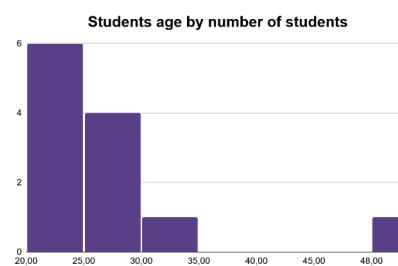
- Small activity of playing with “descriptions” and physical / emotional characteristics.
- Test using [World of Warcraft](#) and "The remarkable life of Ibelin" movie. 

Planning time - 3h (This is on me, though – I took too long planning the activities to put on the test)

- The test consisted of comprehension, grammatical, writing and listening questions.
- All questions were related to the movie “The remarkable life of Ibelin” or the game World of Warcraft.

Student data analysis

Student feedback on the game activities was collected through a brief questionnaire administered after the term. The most relevant results are summarized below.

<h4> Participant Profile</h4> <p>12 students responded (out of a class of 19)</p> <p>Students age by number of students</p>  <p>Self-assessed proficiency levels</p> <table border="1"><thead><tr><th>Level</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Basic</td><td>2</td><td>16.7%</td></tr><tr><td>Advanced</td><td>3</td><td>25.0%</td></tr><tr><td>Intermediate</td><td>7</td><td>57.3%</td></tr></tbody></table>	Level	Count	Percentage	Basic	2	16.7%	Advanced	3	25.0%	Intermediate	7	57.3%	<h4> Previous Experience with Digital Games</h4> <p>All respondents had played games before the course.</p> <p>Frequency of gameplay:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Daily: 4● Weekly: 5● Monthly: 2● Rarely: 1
Level	Count	Percentage											
Basic	2	16.7%											
Advanced	3	25.0%											
Intermediate	7	57.3%											
<h4> Perception of Game-Based Activities in Class</h4> <p>(rated from 1 - Worst to 5 - excellent):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆◆◆◆◆ : 7 students◆◆◆◆◇ : 4 students◆◆◆◇◇ : 1 students◆◆◇◇◇ : 0◆◇◇◇◇ : 0 <p>All students believe that the usage of digital games contributed to their English learning.</p>	<h4> Most Developed Language Skills</h4> <p>Most commonly mentioned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Speaking● Listening and Reading <p>Reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Real-time interaction with peers● Contextual vocabulary exposure● More spontaneous and engaging communication	<h4> Most Memorable Activities</h4> <p>Game activities that stood out for students were:</p> <p>Papers, Please – for its narrative and vocabulary learning</p> <p>Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes – for collaboration and oral communication</p> <p>The Sims, Akinator, and World of Warcraft – for their immersive environments and language use in context</p>											



✓ Highlighted Positive Aspects	⚠ Reported Challenges	💡 Student Suggestions
<p>Students noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Increased motivation and active participationStronger peer interaction and teamworkLearning through play felt more natural and less pressuredInterdisciplinary learning opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Difficulty connecting game content directly to language goalsPotential for distraction due to gameplay focusLimited time to fully explore game contentSome wanted more collaborative or competitive game modes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use selected games in multiple lessons for deeper explorationPrioritize group or multiplayer formatsClarify how game content links to language objectivesAllow more time for immersion and post-game reflection

Key takeaways for other teachers.

Takeaway		Details
1	Don't stop creating	As a teacher, I challenge myself to always add as many new and unique activities as I can.
2	Share your plans with your students	This is a key point in the participative process of teaching. Students want to learn. They want to try new things to help them learn and to tell you if it was a good or a bad experience. And you (should) want all of that too.
3	What students shared with me	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Impact of Digital Games on Learning: Students highlighted improved speaking confidence, group collaboration, and contextualized learning, with games making lessons interactive and engaging.Positive Aspects: Key benefits included enhanced engagement, interdisciplinary vocabulary enrichment, teamwork, and natural learning through enjoyment.Challenges: Issues included passive student participation (on single-player games or gameplay videos, to some students), occasional difficulty connecting games to linguistic goals, and complex instructions needing clarification.Suggestions for Improvement: Recommendations included diversifying game types, aligning games with lesson content, pre-class surveys for student preferences, and extending gameplay to explore multiple language aspects.

My key takeaways

Teaching with games in this context felt exceptional – a real privilege, thanks to the unique setting that allowed me plenty of technological resources, and students that were genuinely eager to explore new methods. I'd gladly do it again, incorporating more genres, new game-based approaches, and even student suggestions (like their last-minute request for Resident Evil). That enthusiasm highlights the potential in LLP.



There is still some room for improvement, such as fostering a more participative class for all, weaving games more deeply into the curriculum, and moving beyond single-session gameplay, creating more interesting combinations with the classes.

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