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Using games for language learning in the age of social distancing

Sébastien Dubreil

The Challenge

When faced with a rapid transition to remote (online) teaching, what are possible pedagogical solutions to that shift? How can we maintain the integrity of the course in its intention and outcomes? This article highlights one such transition through the lens of a course using games and game design as an avenue to teach language and culture.

Department of Modern Languages, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Correspondence
Sébastien Dubreil, Department of Modern Languages, Carnegie Mellon University, 5000 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213.
Email: sdubreil@andrew.cmu.edu

Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has led to nation-wide school closures, the transition to remote teaching has caused profound disruption to classroom instruction. In this article, I share the impact that this forced transition has had on the redesign of the second half of a French course entitled "Gaming culture and culture of games," to meet the pedagogical challenge posed by the pandemic, retain the integrity of the course, and provide useful tools to mitigate the circumstances. In particular, I examine how the situation was an opportunity to combine language and culture pedagogy with game design to enable students to think critically about the course content and contribute meaningful solutions to learning languages in the age of social distancing.

KEYWORDS

culture, games, game-based learning, game design

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has led to schools, colleges, and universities nation-wide to close and transition to remote teaching, the disruption it caused to classroom instruction has been profound. Even though the affordances of instructional technology make such a transition to off-campus instruction a seemingly feasible proposition—albeit not always graceful—appearances can be deceiving as online teaching remains a complex endeavor. Indeed, educational contexts are exceedingly diverse and educators have seen questions around issues of accessibility and the widening of the digital divide rise to the surface, while the pressure remains all too real to deliver quality instruction. Even in the best of circumstances—I am fortunate to teach at an institution, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), that continues to be a leader in online- and technology-mediated instruction—such a dire situation can pose significant challenges when it comes to transitioning a foreign language course centered on building a community of learners, sharing a social experience, and engaged in team projects. In this article, I will share how the school closure forced my co-instructor and me to redesign the second half of a French course entitled "Gaming culture and culture of games." Our goal was to meet the pedagogical challenge posed by the pandemic, retain the integrity of the course, and provide useful tools to mitigate the circumstances that have affected all of us.

2 | CONTEXT, PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK, AND COURSE DESIGN

Educational researchers have recently examined the question of whether making learning fun would be beneficial (Nerantzi & James, 2015). Indeed, playful learning is often conducive to deep learning and, in this sense, games can serve as effective learning tools (Gee, 2003). After all, insights from neuroscience demonstrate that "when the fun stops, learning often stops too" (Willis, 2013). While this is more often admitted for young learners, there is increasingly stronger evidence that well-crafted games can foster learner engagement and, consequently, learning (Whitton, 2011). The link between games and learning applies equally to the area of second language and culture (LC2) learning. Consequently, an increasingly robust corpus of research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) demonstrates the potential and effectiveness of games for LC2 learning in the area of vocabulary, pragmatics, literacy, and multilingual engagement (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2020; Sykes & Dubreil, 2019; see Reinhardt, 2019 for an in-depth discussion). Even though the existing scholarship on games and learning is primarily situated in the area of digital games (online/computer/videogames), board games have proven to be equally effective learning tools in a variety of disciplines, especially in their ability to enhance social relationships and communication (Bayeck, 2020).

The intersection of games and language learning, thus, presents itself as a fertile ground for pedagogical intervention. Indeed, as play has been at the center of human culture since its inception (Huizinga, 1951; in fact, Huizinga argues that play may precede culture), examining a specific culture through its games could provide valuable insights into gaining intercultural competence. When people formed societies, the games they created and developed not only shaped their culture but also occupied a central role in the formation of the social fabric and its transmission. From mimicking gestures necessary to accomplish the tasks of daily life (e.g., strength, accuracy, speed) to simply bringing people together around a common activity, games continue to occupy a privileged space in human societies and function as a way to represent and

interpret the world around us. French culture is no exception to this reality. In fact, the notion of play transpires through much of the language itself, since French is the only Romance language in which play ("jeu" and "jouer") extends beyond the realm of games proper to encompass sports, musical instruments, and, well, the language itself ("jeux de mots").

In France, games are currently the second most sold—and used—cultural product (after books), a testimony to the cultural importance of games. According to recent numbers, even though videogames have increased their share of the market (France is one of the largest producers of video games in the world), they have not spelt the doom of other forms of games as initially feared (board games grossed well over $400 million in 2019—by far the largest European market). Because of the privileged role of play and games as a form of entertainment, a way of learning, and a vehicle for constructing social bonds (Donovan, 2017; Erway, 2017; Woods, 2012), it is, therefore, reasonable to imagine that games offer a legitimate window through which to gain insights into the French cultural landscape. It is precisely this role that the course was designed to explore.

3 | COURSE DESIGN AND OBJECTIVES

Taking an active learning approach, the course was initially set up around four modules or themes. In the introduction to the course, we first discussed some traditions around the notion of games and play in France, how games and culture mirrored or informed each other, and envisioned what could be learned about the French language and culture through playful practices and game design. It is important to note that the course was co-taught by the author and Sabrina Culyba Haskell, a CMU Entertainment Technology Center alumna who has since had a stellar career as a principal designer at Schell Games and is the recent author of *The Transformational Framework: a process tool for the development of transformational games* (Culyba, 2018).

The other three modules of the course followed a similar structure. Students and instructors would play a variety of games carefully selected for being representative of French (play) culture in general and featuring a substantial language element. In other words, these games fell in one of two categories: (a) language or language play was the focal point of gameplay (e.g., finding a funny and appropriate comeback to a prompt—*Taggle*; creating a phrase based on an image—*Dixit*; or linking words to concepts—*Concept*) or (b) verbal communication (i.e., language use) between players was key in the success of the game (e.g., cooperative games and escape games). It is also important to note that we used games that were designed and commercialized by French studios and have enjoyed popular success. As with any new course, we had to delimit the choice of materials in order to retain the integrity of the pedagogical enterprise, which was predicated on giving students enough time to play and carefully analyze a variety of games, as well as design their own. Consequently, several game genres were eliminated and we elected to examine the following three: party games[1] ("jeux d'ambiance in French"), cooperative games[2], and escape games[3] (see below for a complete list of the games we played). With the instructors' guidance, students deconstructed and analyzed the games to gain a detailed understanding of the cultural elements they reveal, both through their content and game mechanics. Some of the questions that we used as points of departure, for example, were as follows: Why is it that collaborative games have been so widely popular in France before they even crossed the Atlantic? Why are so many games featuring aspects of play on words and verbal jousting? Why contribute to the disproportionate success of escape games in France (proportionately twice as many as in the United States)?

List of games played in class				
Title	Genre	Year	Designer	Publisher
Taggle	Party game	2017	Yves Hirschfeld Fabien Bleuze	Le Droit de Perdre
Dixit	Party game	2008	Jean-Louis Roubira Marie Cardouat	Libellud
Concept	Party game Cooperative game	2013	Alain Rivollet Gaëtan Beaujannot	Repos Production Asmodée
Guédelon	Cooperative game	2016	Xavier Faure Benoît Héron	Asyncron
Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde	Cooperative game	2005	Bruno Cathala Serge Laget Julien Delval	Days of Wonder
Unlock	Escape game	2017	Cyril Demaegd Pierre Santamaria	Space Cowboys
Just One	Party game	2018	Ludovic Roudy Bruno Sautter	Repos Production

The second part of the analysis was to address the question of how these games could be used to promote French language and culture learning. Each of those modules culminated in a design phase in which the students harnessed the power of games as learning objects for language and culture. In those phases, the deliverable for the students was to create a series of games in each genre, keeping in mind that these games could be used in the French L2 classroom. In other words, teams of students would design a "French game" or their own, that is to say, a game that showcases their understanding of French culture both in the content of their games and how that content aligns with the game mechanics.

From a language and culture pedagogical perspective, this course was designed to allow students to learn in an interdisciplinary environment mixing language acquisition, (inter)cultural studies, and design thinking. In particular, both in their games and in the process of game design, students engaged with the five dimensions of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) articulated around savoirs (in particular knowledge of social groups and their cultural products and practices as well as social processes), savoir être (i.e., intercultural attitude such curiosity and openness and ability to decenter one's values and beliefs), savoir comprendre (interpreting documents and relating to one's own culture), savoir apprendre/faire (ability to learn new cultural knowledge and apply it), and savoir s'engager (critical cultural awareness). Students were also asked to consider their audience when designing their games, that is to say, to keep in mind what level of proficiency the players playing their games would have potentially reached.

It is important to note that although we asked students to make digital versions of their party games (to be playable on TableTop Simulator), we opted to have them design analog board games for two reasons. First, digital games can be complex and onerous to design in terms of time commitment and technology wherewithal. A potential effect of this reality is that too much time would be spent on learning the technology and not enough on the core objectives of the course. Second, one of our goals was to make games available for other French instructors to use in their classrooms or serve as inspiration for other LC2 instructors to use and/or design more games in their courses. We are aware that while deemed ubiquitous, computer technology can be unevenly distributed in American classrooms.

In this constructivist approach, inspired by the Studio H project (Pilloton, 2012) and the Quest to Learn project (Salen, Torres, Wolozin, Rufo-Tepper, & Shapiro, 2011), we endeavored to build a learning ecosystem that could be best described as a pedagogy of making. At its core, the classroom experience was, essentially, to build a community of players and game designers. More importantly, we sought to transform our students from learners to social actors (Kern & Liddicoat, 2008), that is to say as agents of social change who mobilize linguistic and cultural resources to have an impact on the environment around them. In this case, the games students designed have the potential to shape the school environment (a) by introducing an artifact in a language other than English and (b) by promoting different ways to learn. This is why the games that the students created were and/ or will be made public in two ways: as an analog object[4] available in CMU's Askwith Kenner Global Languages and Cultures Room for other students and visitors to play and online for other French instructors to download and play with their own students.

4 | COURSE REDESIGN AND LESSONS LEARNED

In the middle of Spring Break, CMU decided to transition the entirety of instruction to remote teaching in response to the public health crisis caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. At that time, we had completed two full modules (the introduction and party games), and the third module (cooperative games) was underway. We had played and analyzed cooperative games. Students had modded Guédelon, a commercially available game retracing the historical renovation of a castle in Burgundy, to scaffold gameplay and make it more accessible for language learners (including the writing of a pedagogical guide at the attention of teachers). They had also started designing their own cooperative games. The second half of the semester was to be dedicated to students experiencing and analyzing escape games (both in-person and breakout games) and creating their final project. How were we to retain the initial intention/essence of the course while maintaining the pedagogical integrity in terms of delivery and learning outcomes? The core of our endeavor could be summarized as follows:

- Play together
- Participate together in in-depth conversations and analyses about gameplay, game mechanics, game design, and language and culture pedagogy
- Design games collaboratively
- Design games for LC2 learning

Clearly, much of the "togetherness" in the shared experiences was going to be challenged. Furthermore, the course was entirely project-based and all of our deliverables had an analog— or at best both an analog and digital—form. We had to regroup.

Our first steps were to ensure that all of our students were safe, healthy, and mentally ready. We also inquired about their geographical situation, their living accommodations, and their access to a decent workspace and the internet. Once these parameters were established our guiding principles were (a) finish outstanding projects, (b) reshape the course while keeping its spirit intact, (c) identify authentic and pertinent game genres, and (d) re-engineer the conditions of possibility of leveraging the affordances of CMU's preferred remote teaching platform (Zoom) to deliver the course we "wanted" under the circumstances. We arrived at a plan we entitled "Learning French with games in the age of social distancing," which was primarily designed on creating social gameplay experiences that could be shared online, either

synchronously or asynchronously. Out of a myriad of options, we selected three genres: Roll and Write (R&W) games, Interactive Fiction (IF) games[5], and party games. Party games imposed itself as a genre that we had already discussed and with which we had experimented; we thought they would be interesting to revisit under these new circumstances. R&W games have drastically increased in popularity in the last 2 years with more than half of such games ever created appearing in that period of time (St. Clair, 2019; Un, 2018); French game designers have a good presence in this space. IF games—or text-based adventure games—have also garnered renewed interest as an upgrade from "choose your own story" adventures and with the advent of platforms to create them (Alexander, 2014; Montfort, 2005; Stuart, 2010); although they are somewhat of a niche in France, IF games are currently enjoying a rebirth in France (Labrande, 2011). Together these three genres constituted the new basis on which the second half of the course was to be built.

The mechanics of the course proceeded as usual. We played games together, analyzed them for content, mechanics, and their affordances for language and culture learning. The table below lists the games we played:

Game	Genre	Designer/Author
Just One	Party game	Ludovic Roudy and Bruno Sautter
Codenames	Party game	Vladaa Chvátil
Corinth	Roll and Write	Sébastien Pauchon
Rolling Realms	Roll and Write	Jamey Stegmaier
Lantern	Roll and Write	Diego DiMaggio
Rolling Village	Roll and Write	Diego DiMaggio
Cité des Eaux	Interactive Fiction	Adrien Saurat
Filaments	Interactive Fiction	JB Ferrant
Escape the Room	Interactive Fiction	George Vicarey
La Tempête	Interactive Fiction	Stéphane F

Gameplay sessions forced us to envision—and occasionally pretest—the gameplay experience to accommodate the fact that they were going to be held via Zoom and that we wanted to be able to have a trace of it. This led, for example, to establish a dice camera with its own Zoom account so that all players could see the dice rolled in R&W games that had "community dice," that is to say when the same dice are used by all players either simultaneously or consecutively. This also led to designing gameboards on Google slides so that we could discuss the various strategies deployed by the different players. In so doing, we were also modeling for students ways in which they could project themselves in this new design space.

Students were expected to design two games for their final projects, each in a different genre, with the additional constraint that one of them had to be an R&W game. The rationale for this decision was that students were least familiar with this genre and we believed it offered some interesting challenges and opportunities as a design space. Not only did students have to design games to be playable using a desktop videoconferencing platform (preferably Zoom since it seems to be ubiquitous in today's context, especially in educational institutions), they also had to keep in mind the pedagogical imperative of the course, that is to say, these games should be

designed to teach about the French language and culture and would be made available to French teachers and learners.

For these projects, students were grouped in teams of two. Students had worked in teams of three for the first module and teams of two for the second one. We had made the decision to privilege this latter configuration even prior to transitioning to remote teaching for two reasons: smaller teams seemed to be more agile, which proved to be an asset in a learning environment where rapid prototyping and successive iterations on the same project were needed. More importantly, although our gameplay sessions and subsequent conversations throughout the semester had been engaged, animated, and deep, we wanted to encourage more active participation, dialogue, and engagement between team members (in French) during the design process. This latter aspect proved easier to achieve with smaller teams.

Despite the complexities engendered by the situation and the major pivot we had to negotiate in the course, students responded and met the challenges with grace and creativity in their design choices. They not only chose interesting topics to explore but also maximized the affordances of Zoom and other online collaborative platforms such as the apps of the Google suite, making use of breakout rooms, the whiteboard, and the chat among others. All teams also opted to develop online game boards in addition to print and play options for their R&W games. The teams that elected to create IF games successfully learned and used Quest (http://textadventures.co.uk/quest) to develop their adventures.

After the first hurdle of redesigning the course, we had to face and negotiate ongoing challenges throughout the rest of the semester. The first one is the large amount of electronic correspondence needed to keep students informed of the shift in the course delivery and help them shift gear, organize their workflow, and manage telecollaboration toward creating tangible outcomes. More elusive and complex was keeping our finger of the pulse of our students' physical and mental health as the situation generated an unsettling feeling of anxiety and acute stress. Finally, as expected in a team-taught class, the transition to remote teaching, leading to the course redesign and different delivery format, demanded increased collaboration and communication between the two instructors to refine our approach, prepare instructional materials, evaluate the success of the instructional experience, and reflect on the choices we made and the students' response to them.

5 | CONCLUSION

It is an understatement that the consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic will be felt for a long time, including in the educational sphere as we are called to design new ways to deploy instruction. It is especially true in the area of LC2 learning as we seek to promote language learning as a social activity, both in its process and its purpose. In this course, "Culture of games and gaming culture," the classroom was, in turn, a social space (complete with snacks!), a teaching and learning space, and a design space. Through playing, analyzing, and designing games, we essentially explored language (and culture) as social–relational phenomena and examined the ways in which social relationships structure LC2 pedagogy and lead students to hone a wide variety of abilities (e.g., languacultural competence, design thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration) that hopefully lead them to become more effective communicators and community builders.

Transitioning to remote teaching forced us to meet the challenge of maintaining the integrity of the pedagogical enterprise in an era of "social distancing," "confinement," and "quarantine." We sought to double down on the core and the objectives of the course to develop

and propose a pedagogical solution that situated language and culture learning as a lived practice, social action, and engagement. Not only did students engage in authentic learning activities, but they also designed games that adhere to a social conception of language and to sound principles of game-based learning in order to facilitate language learning in the age of social distancing. In so doing, our community of students and instructors operated simultaneously in two authentic linguistic and cultural contexts: the context of French games and the reality of the surrounding public health crisis. We were reminded that the key to successful online teaching is less predicated on the technological tools—although having access to them helps—but rather on our ability to reflect critically on our values and beliefs, and on pedagogical practices we want to promote.

The far less than ideal circumstances that surrounded the transition to remote teaching enabled us to experience the relevance of emerging communicative contexts. Our students strive to be agents of their own learning and to have a positive impact on the world around them. By harnessing the strengths of a strong participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2005) and a pedagogy of making, we were able to heed the call (Dubreil & Thorne, 2017) that it is critical that LC2 educators channel and leverage our students' tendencies and aspirations to equip them with the critical thinking and interactional competencies they need to understand others and themselves and perhaps foster the empathy we all need to develop and sustain meaningful social relationships in today's multicultural, multilingual societies.

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ENDNOTES

1 A party game is a board game where the goal is not so much to win as to spend a fun and pleasant moment (with family or friends) or to set the mood for an evening. In general, party games have a short, accessible, and funny format with simple game mechanics.

2 A cooperative game is a board game in which all the players win or lose together. Instead of playing in opposition to each other, players play together to achieve a common goal, out of any spirit of competition, usually against the game itself.

3 Escape games consists mostly of trying to escape from a room in a limited time (usually an hour) and is usually played in a group as collaboration is essential. New formats include breakout boxes. The most polished versions use real padlocks or a smartphone application as part of the game experience.

4 We used a website called The Game Crafter (https://www.thegamecrafter.com/), a web-to-print game publishing company that enables the user to upload files and receive a professionally manufactured and durable board game.

5 R&W games involve players rolling dice, making choices or decisions, and marking a sheet of paper. The most famous of these games is Yahtzee but R&W games have evolved rapidly in design and complexity, making them compelling to play. For example, they include dice manipulation, cascading choices (i.e., the first choice a player makes constrains subsequent choices), or multiple win states. They also sometimes reprise famous

board games such as Settlers of Catan or Castles of Burgundy. IF games—or text adventures as they are sometimes known—are part game, part work of literature. They share the narrative storytelling of adventures but the reader has to interact with the story for it to continue. In the gamebook format, they resemble "choose your own story" books. In its more elaborate form, the player can actually provide simple text commands (e.g., "explore room," "open door," and "go north") to interact with the story. The genre was made popular in the 1980s with games like Zork and has recently regained some popularity in both the United States and France, partly owing to the number and the ease of use of platforms available to develop them.

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