ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND VIDEO GAMES: THE GAME PERSONA 4: GOLDEN IN A DISCURSIVE GENRE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This study aims at discussing how the discursive genre theory (BAKHTIN, 1992; DOLZ; SCHNEUWLY, 2004) contributes to the understanding of how video games can foster English language learning. *Persona 4: Golden,* the video game chosen for this study, was analyzed through Dolz and Schneuwly's (2004), namely: action capacities; linguistic capacities; linguistic-discursive capacities. The analysis shows that the first six hours of gameplay of the aforementioned object of study present a wide array of text genres that simulate texts found in the real world, engaging players in authentic practices that stimulate language learning. Moreover, as the understanding of language is a prerequisite to move forward in the game, motivation is a key factor in P4G. Lastly, since the game used in this study is also present in other media, players might engage in gaming culture.
Keywords: English language learning; Video games; Discursive genres.

VIDEO GAMES E APRENDIZAGEM DE LÍNGUA INGLESA: O JOGO PERSONA 4: GOLDEN EM UMA PERSPECTIVA DE GÊNEROS DISCURSIVOS

Resumo: O presente estudo tem como objetivo discutir como a teoria de gêneros discursivos (BAKHTIN, 1992; DOLZ; SCHNEUWLY, 2004) contribui para a compreensão de como video games podem incentivar o aprendizado de língua inglesa. *Persona 4: Golden*, o jogo escolhido para esse estudo, foi analisado através das capacidades de linguagem descritas por Dolz e Schneuwly (2004), a saber: capacidade de ação; capacidade linguística; capacidade linguístico-discursiva. A análise demonstra que, nas primeiras seis horas de jogo do objeto supracitado, é possível encontrar textos que simulam gêneros encontrados no mundo real, engajando, assim, os jogadores em práticas autênticas que estimulam o aprendizado de línguas. Além disso, considerando o entendimento da língua como um requisito para prosseguir no jogo, a motivação é um fator crucial em P4G. Finalmente, uma vez que o jogo utilizado nesse estudo também está presente em outras mídias, há a possibilidade de jogadores/aprendizes se engajarem na cultura desse *game*.
Palavras-chave: Aprendizado de língua inglesa; Video games; Gêneros do discurso.

APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS Y VIDEOJUEGOS: EL JUEGO PERSONA 4: GOLDEN EN LA PERSPECTIVA DE GÉNEROS DISCURSIVOS

Resumen: Este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar cómo la teoría de los géneros (BAKHTIN, 1992; DOLZ; SCHNEUWLY, 2004) contribuye a la comprensión de cómo los videojuegos pueden fomentar el aprendizaje del idioma inglés. Persona 4: Golden, el videojuego elegido para este estudio se analizó a través de las habilidades lingüísticas descritas por Dolz y Schneuwly (2004), a saber: la capacidad para la acción; las habilidades lingüísticas; la capacidad lingüística y discursiva. El análisis muestra que dentro de las primeras seis horas del objeto del videojuego antes mencionado, se pueden encontrar textos que simulan géneros que se encuentran en el mundo real, la participación, por lo que los jugadores en las prácticas auténticas que fomenten el aprendizaje de idiomas. Por otra parte, teniendo en cuenta el conocimiento de la lengua como un requisito para continuar en el videojuego, la motivación es un factor crucial en P4G. Por último, ya que el videojuego se utiliza en este estudio también está presente en otros medios de comunicación, existe la posibilidad de que los jugadores / alumnos participan en la cultura de este videojuego.
Palabras clave: el aprendizaje del idioma inglés; Videojuegos; Géneros discursivos.

INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasing interest in the use of video games for educational purposes. Researchers such as James Paul Gee (see GEE, 2003), Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler (see STEINKUEHLER; SQUIRE; BARAB, 2012), for instance, have investigated how games such as Pikmin, Lineage, Civilization III and World of Warcraft can help to develop affinity spaces, communities created around a mutual interest (GEE, 2003) and how apprenticeship occurs in such games (STEINKUEHLER; OH, 2012), to name only a few studies.

The same interest on such games may be observed within the field of language learning research. Reinders & Wattana (2011), for instance, describe how the task of fulfilling quests in the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (or simply MMORPG, a video game that allows synchronized communication between players from different places) *Ragnarok Online* leads to willingness to communicate, being English the widely used means of communication in international servers. In another study, Sylven and Sundqvist (2012) compared the English language development of gamers as opposed to that of non-gamers, and establish that the former category presents a better vocabulary than the latter.

Most studies, however, focus on multiplayer games. In this article, I propose to discuss how the video game *Persona 4: Golden* (P4G) for Playstation Vita may contribute to English language learning, both in formal and informal contexts. Moreover, I argue that *Persona 4* is a game which demonstrates a full range of simulated discursive genres (MARCUSCHI, 2002) that can be identified through Dolz and Schneuwly's (2004) language capacities.

This paper is structured as follows: first, I present the theoretical framework used for this research, comprising a discussion about discursive genres, video games and language learning, and *Persona 4: Golden*; the following part presents the methodology used for this research; then, in the analysis, I identify four of the discursive genres in the first seven hours of gameplay (informal talk, news report, weather report, and giving directions); after the analysis, the findings are discussed along with affordances for formal and informal English language learning; finally, I conclude, suggesting possibilities for further research.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. DISCURSIVE GENRES

Discursive genres have become paramount in Brazilian education. Educational documents, such as the PCN (1998) and the recent guidelines for production of didactic books (PNLD 2014) stress that the apprentice must have contact with a variety of genres during formal teaching.

Only what are discursive genres? According to Bakhtin (1992), genres are forms of interaction; verbal communication exists within specific discursive genres. In other words, they are a prerequisite for communication. Furthermore, there are countless discursive genres, considering that there are countless contexts and tools in and through which people interact every day. Genres can also be primary or secondary, depending on their level of complexity. Examples of the primary genres may be a simple talk and a note, and secondary genres may be exemplified by movie reviews and essays.

That said, it is important to clarify that, for Bakhtin (1992), discursive genres are *relatively stable*; that is, they do not always follow strict rules of production and circulation. In

her discussion of Bakhtin's work, Silva (2012) points to the importance of the concept of *subjectivity*. Taking Bakhtin's conceptualizations into consideration, this author asserts that meaning never pertains to only one individual; it is, instead, influenced by the ideas and lived experience of another. This relates to what Silva (2012) defines as *dialogic relationships*: every linguistic action needs an Other.

Along the same lines, Dolz & Schneuwly (2004) agree that genres are ways of acting through language. These actions are, naturally, shaped by social contexts and relations of power, since language production does not exist in a vacuum. That said, these authors point to the existence of "required aptitudes of the learner for the production of a genre in a determined interaction situation" (p. 54). In other words, the characteristics of a genre can be learned, so that an individual can use it more consciously. In order to present the features of genres in a more orderly manner, Dolz & Schneuwly (2004) divide a genre's characteristics in the following *language capacities*:

(i) The action capacity (A.C.): refers to the context of production of a text, its social place;

(ii) The Discursive Capacity (D.C): refers to the choice of content and types of discourse within a text, its *general infrastructure;*

(iii) The Linguistic-Discursive Capacity (L.D.C): refers to the *internal architecture* of the text; in other words, the innermost structure of language, for instance, the connectives and modals, as well as the remaining textual choices needed for the production of a genre, such as cohesion and modality.

Such capacities are used to analyze the affordances for discursive genre and English language learning in *Persona 4: Golden*.

1.2. VIDEO GAMES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Video games are not static media; they have been increasing in complexity since *Pong*, the phenomenon which changed the gaming landscape. Moreover, it is possible to approach the evolution of video games in several ways, such as examining the graphics and the storylines.

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Holmes (2012), for instance, offers a detailed history of storytelling in video games, from the early classics such as *The Secret of the Monkey Island* to the recent, cutting-edge *Heavy Rain*.

Given this ever-changing nature of video games, researchers were hesitant to consider them as a valid object of analysis until 2003 with the release of *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy,* by James Paul Gee, where the author, a world-renowned scholar, discusses the benefits of video games for literacy and education in general. Gee (2003) also demonstrates how players' identities are influenced by the games they play.

In his book, Gee presents a reasoning about video games as *semiotic domains*; that is, "any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings" (GEE, 2003, p. 18). Nevertheless, all the features within the semiotic domain relate to each other, and words, for example, acquire specific meanings within these domains. The word *loot*, for instance, means to "get items, dropped by enemies, from the ground" in the semiotic domain of MMORPGs, rather than the original meaning, a synonym of "pillage".

The concept of semiotic domains is relevant for this study in the sense that, within these domains, a wide range of genres may be simulated and reproduced. Furthermore, the form and content of the genre may vary depending on the semiotic domain where it circulates. *Game tutorials*, for example, may be found in different forms: in a game which heavily relies on its mechanics, the tutorials will most likely focus solely on gameplay, whereas in story-based video games, such as Persona 4: Golden, the tutorials are a valuable asset for explaining the nature of the game world as well.

Since Gee's seminal work, video game studies have grown in terms of variety of themes and complexity, following the overall development of the industry. The field of language learning has benefitted greatly from this movement. Kronenberg (2012) discusses the inherently social nature of video games, which use graphic art and interactivity in order to give the player an extremely sensorial experience, to emphasize the advantages of these games for language learning.

Furthermore, Storto (2013) highlights the contextualized nature of the language that is used in a game; there is almost a symbiotic relationship where the context depends on the language and the language depends on the context. Leffa et al. (2012) follow the same line of reasoning, arguing that video games demand intensive use of linguistic skills, immerse players in their graphics and story, allowing, thus, the development of English language skills (considering that most of the widely distributed video games are in English).

1.3. PERSONA 4: GOLDEN

Persona 4: Golden (P4G) is the fourth installment of a series of role-playing games developed by Atlas. Even though the Playstation Vita version which I used as a basis for this article was released in 2012, *Persona 4* had been available for Playstation 2 since 2008. Miller (2012) offers a short description of the basic plot on IGN, a website specialized in videogames:

> Persona 4 Golden is equal parts high school drama and dungeon crawling action. Our protagonist moves to the countryside town of Inaba, makes some friends at school, and – bam – a woman's murdered. Over the course of the game, the protagonist and his buds uncover a serial killer tossing victims into another world via TV screens, and the group of high schoolers is the only thing that can save the day.[1]

At starting the game, the name of the protagonist is chosen by the player. There are other two main characters which belong to the controlled group (or party, in gaming language): Chie, a short-haired girl who loves Kung-Fu movies, and Yosuke, an outgoing boy who, like the protagonist, also came from a big city.

Apart from the modern storyline, there are several features that make P4 engaging. As Miller (2012) argues, "living in Inaba, you'll attend school and take pop quizzes. You'll have part-time jobs. You'll join sports teams and clubs. You'll choose dialogue responses that affect relationships." In other words, P4 is not entirely linear; it is a game that offers multiple pathways for the player to choose. Player's decisions will directly influence the course of action. Furthermore, establishing relationships and choosing certain dialog sequences do not simply add freedom to the game. Rather, they lead to immediate feedback, which, as McGonigal (2011)

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[1] MILLER, G. Persona 4 Golden Review. Available at: <http://www.ign.com/articles/2012/11/21/persona-4-golden-review>. Accessed on: 29 sep 2015.

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argues, is an important feature of good video games. For example, studying at your desk increases the Knowledge attribute, whilst attending music club practice raises your Expression.

Finally, P4G is not simply a game. A comic book version (or manga, in the original Japanese) was released in 2008, as well as an animated series broadcasted between October, 2011 and March, 2012. The variety of content related to P4G, thus, helps to develop a culture centered on this game world and fosters online discussions that, sometimes, revolve around the connection between the different media. According to Ryu (2011), this *gaming culture* is important for language learning, as it encourages language learners to informally practice their traditional and new literacy while and after playing games.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this article is to identify affordances for English language learning (both in formal and informal contexts) in the video game *Persona 4: Golden* for Sony's handheld device Playstation Vita. In order to accomplish this objective, the analysis presents screenshots taken from the first six and a half hours of gameplay (in my case, that corresponds to the action that precedes the first strong "boss" of the game, *Shadow Yukiko*), observing which discursive genres may be identified inside the game and relating their characteristics to the aforementioned Dolz and Schneuwly's (2004) language capacities (A.C., D.C., and L.D.C.).

3. ANALYSIS

In this section, I will present screenshots taken from P4, demonstrating how they might simulate discursive genres which circulate in different social spheres.

One of the primary characteristics of the game that should be brought up is the possibility given to the participant to express himself/herself through what Holmes (2012) calls **dialog trees**. These are possibilities given to the player to choose what to say at some points in the game, choices which may or may not influence in the course of action. In the case of P4G, dialog trees are occasionally presented in **informal talks** such as the ones below.

Figure 1. Informal Talk with Yosuke.[2]

Figure 2. Informal Talk with Teddie.

It is common knowledge that informal talks generally occur in situations where formal register is not required. Normally, they take place between two interlocutors who have established a social bond, such as friends, family members and romantic partners. That said, the *context of production* of informal talks is identified (which refers to Dolz and Schneuwly's (2004) action capacities). This contextualization can be observed in figures 1 and 2; in the first, there is a conversation between two friends, the main character and Yosuke, while in the second, there is a lively argument between Teddie (the *Mysterious Bear*) and the protagonists.

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[2] All images are©Atlus U.S.A., Inc. 2014 Published by ATLUS. The images used in this article were taken from the game by the author.

Heberle (1999) discusses further characteristics of oral discourse: "[it] is usually immediate and emotionally engaging" (p. 3). In this sense, in both of the aforementioned cases the choice of content matches the features of informal talks. In the first figure, Yosuke's question demands an immediate answer; in the second, Teddie shows clear emotions in his discourse.

Features of informal talks also include particles such as *"Oh, Well, and, but, so"* (HEBERLE, 1999, p. 3) which "contribute for the production and interpretation of speech and mark an interactional presence" (p. 3). Bringing the discussion to the examples, one of these particles, "*Well*", is present in figure 1. In figure two, "*raaawr!*" is an interjection, which also belongs primarily to oral discourse according to Heberle (1999). These linguistic choices refer to the linguistic-discursive capacities.

It is important to mention, however, that the motivation to understand what is going on in P4G resides not only in grasping what the story is about; rather, as Holmes (2012) argues, players' choices define what actions will be performed in the game, and dialog trees offer opportunities for players to make choices which may trigger immediate (or not so immediate) consequences. Linguistic understanding, in this perspective, is essential for the players' awareness of his/her choices and their consequences. It may also lead to a more comprehensive language acquisition, especially in terms of vocabulary in context, as the player becomes more familiar with the game world.

The contact with these informal talks within video game worlds may also help the player to understand colloquial language better in real contexts. That said, these informal dialogues are valuable for language learning in the sense that they bring uses of language that are not commonly taught in a formal classroom, as sometimes such colloquialisms are deemed as inadequate or ungrammatical.

P4G also presents journalistic texts such as **news reports**. The following screenshot can be used as an instance.

Figure 3. News report.

The screenshot shows the protagonist and the daughter of his host, Nanako, watching the news. The image presented on the TV resembles many news bulletins which exist in the *real world*; there are two newscasters (or announcers) responsible for the reports. P4, in this sense, aims to simulate the real context of production of this discursive genre (action capacity).

The discursive choices (discursive capacity) correspond to the ones expected from a news report: formal, explanatory and/or narrative language. Huckin (1998) notes that 'news reports are supposed to use "neutral, objective" language, but some reporters will insert an occasional loaded word to slant the report' (p. 82), and this also applies to the journalistic language used in P4G – the word *bizarre*, in the example provided, adds a more dramatic tone to the story that will be narrated. The lexical choices (linguistic discursive capacity), thus, also match the characteristics of news reports.

Furthermore, the news report is not added to the game only to make it longer. Such pieces give information which may be extremely relevant, since the main plot is directly linked to murders and abductions occurring in the city of Inaba. News reports add a degree of importance to the actions performed by the player.

Another journalistic discursive genre identifiable in P4G is the **weather report**. The action capacities are similar to those of the news report, but weather reports bring more specialized lexicon, as shown below.

Figure 4. Weather report.

Although presented in the same news bulletin as the news report, the weather report presents a visibly different general infrastructure. The language used is essentially descriptive (discursive capacity) and there is specialized vocabulary, as previously mentioned (*high-pressure fronts… sunny spring-like weather*).

The weather report may seem trivial to those who have never player P4G, but weather directly influences the course of the game. Besides letting the protagonist die, there are other ways of losing the game, and one of them is not saving Yukiko (the protagonists' friend who was kidnapped) before the fog comes – which would be after consecutive days of rain. Keeping an eye on the weather is, then, crucial in P4.

Moreover, instructional texts can also be found within the game. That is the case of **giving directions**. There is not a specific context in which this genre may be found; instructions may be, in P4G, given by classmates, friends, teachers, and even passersby. The organization (discursive capacity), however, is similar in every context: short and precise directional instructions, mentioning landmarks whenever necessary (linguistic-discursive capacity). One example is provided below:
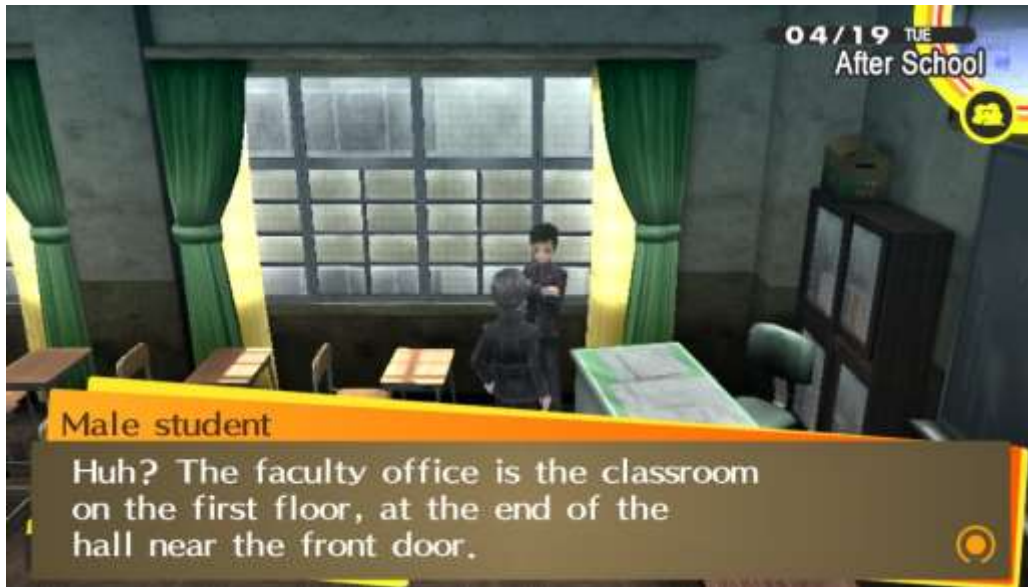
Figure 5. Giving directions I.

The information provided by the interlocutor (in this case, the *Male student*) triggers an action that should be performed by the player. Understanding the message is, again, crucial to proceed. In the example, the player needs to find the faculty office in order to get information about cultural and sports clubs. At the destination, I chose to learn about sports clubs, and further directions are given – this time, by Mr. Morooka, one of the teachers.

Figure 6. Giving directions – II.

Finally, it is important to mention that apart from the discursive genres mentioned in this article, P4G simulates a wide variety of other discourses that are found in real contexts,

such as television advertisements, TV guides, TV shows, music videos, formal and informal requests (in contexts such as coffee shops and equipment stores, for example).

Figure 7. Television advertisement in P4G.

The following table summarizes the genres found in P4G which were analyzed in this study and their respective language capacities.

Table 1. Language capacities in Persona 4: Golden.

GENRE	ACTION CAPACITY	DISCURSIVE CAPACITY	LINGUISTIC-DISCURSIVE CAPACITY
Informal talk	Formal discourse not required; social bond possible between interlocutors	Informal, everyday language	Informal vocabulary, interjections possible
News report	Produced in news bulletins; two formal newscasters	Formal, explanatory and descriptive language	Formal, neutral, objective vocabulary; loaded words possible
Weather report	Produced in news	Formal, descriptive	Formal, specialized

	bulletins; one weather announcer	language	vocabulary
Giving directions	Produced in various contexts	Instructional language	Short and precise message, landmarks mentioned when necessary

4. DISCUSSION

Persona 4: Golden is, along with other recent titles, an example of an immersive environment which provides the player with various opportunities for interaction with characters whose personalities are carefully crafted and a world where every action has a purpose. In this sense, P4G may excel where school does not: it provides clear reasons to move forward and the promise of rewards at the end of every mission; and that is the very definition of a good video game (MCGONIGAL, 2011).

As an immersive environment, P4G succeeds in simulating life-like discursive genres, which leads to several implications for learning.

(i) **Players can engage in authentic language practices.** According to discursive genre theory, we are able to communicate adequately with our peers when we share the same knowledge of language practices. That said, P4G succeeds in engaging the player, through its semiotic domains (GEE, 2003), in situations where the linguistic choices in simulated discursive genres correspond to what he/she is likely to encounter in the same genres outside the video game.

(ii) **Understanding the message is a prerequisite to move forward.** In various situations in P4G, the player needs to understand what is asked of him, or other directions given, in other to complete side quests or even move forward in the main plot. Different from most of formal schooling, understanding in video games is not an end on itself; rather, it leads the player to a course of action in which, if he/she succeeds, an instant reward will follow (such as bonus status or even leveling up a character).

(iii) Players might become part of gaming cultures. When playing a game (or before, or after), the player may want to interact with peers who have already finished it in order to ask for help to overcome challenges such as strong "bosses". In P4G, for instance, many enemies have weaknesses, and figuring them out by oneself may not be so easy. When asking for help, the player has to use language that peers will understand and be able to comprehend the response that might follow. Moreover, it is also common for video game fans to produce other discourses using as a basis its characters, or its storyline. These discourses are also part of the aforementioned *gaming cultures*, which, according to Ryu (2013), can foster language learning:

> [Players] can learn simple words or phrases related to the game content while playing games. After game play, they can participate in the activity of language learning from native or more fluent peers, practicing advanced forms of language such as sentences or paragraphs. (p. 298)

Moreover, the discussion brings possibilities for the use of video games in classrooms using a discursive genre approach. Since the video game would, in this case, provide the content to be learned, the teacher would become a guide, rather than a lecturer, responsible for solving language problems while students advance in their gameplay. The approach used in this article, namely identifying discursive genres within P4 and discussing their language capacities, their adequacy and similarity to real world genres, can be used in language classrooms.

There are further possibilities. Discussions can also be fostered in order to find possibilities to defeat strong enemies, find and finish side-quests, and/or talk about the plot in general. Furthermore (and perhaps more importantly), teachers can guide students through the production of other genres derived from video games, most of which are part of gaming cultures. Again, there are plenty of possibilities, such as creating Walkthroughs (a general tutorial for finishing video games), gameplay journals (where players/students might describe what they played in a specific day and reflect upon his/her choices, as well as the learned content), or fan fictions (stories based on the characters from the game).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I analyzed different discursive genres simulated within the video game *Persona 4: Golden*, in order to demonstrate how language in this game is essentially contextualized and linked to discursive genres frequently used in what we would call "real world". This simulation of different genres brings several implications for language learning, mainly: (a) the engagement in real(istic) language practices through the semiotic domain of the game, where language has a real purpose and is paramount to the effectiveness of the simulated reality; (b) the need to understand messages to succeed in the game; (c) the involvement in gaming cultures, which expand the possibilities of interaction with other players outside the game world, thus creating *affinity spaces* (GEE, 2015) where the game experience is expanded and informal (language) learning is likely to happen.

That said, I defend that not only teachers, but also learners have to recognize the value of the video game as a tool for language learning. As I discussed in this article, video games come in different sizes and shapes, and there are new graphics and new stories (and modes of stories) every day – which expands the possibilities for studies within this field.

This study shows only one fraction of what video games are capable of. Further possibilities for analysis that can be explored include: the political and social nature of games, and how it brings not only the language, but also social themes to the English language classroom; how minorities, for example, are portrayed in such games and what the implications for players' social perception are; and, finally, how new, user-friendly game-making tools increase the possibilities of video game creation in the classroom and the linguistic development that it allows.

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