

The Italian Digital Classroom: Italian Culture and Literature through Digital Tools and Social Media

1. Using Video Games to Teach Italian Language and Culture: Useful, Effective, Feasible?

Video games are a highly relevant part of life for our student population. According to the Pew Research Center (PRC, 2015), half of American adults play videogames, and 70% of college students play video games “at least once in a while” (Weaver).¹

Some of the current commercial console and PC video games (some of which are also available on Mac, Android, and iOS) are digital, multi-media *realia* that can be used to enhance language acquisition both in and outside the classroom. The advantages of *realia* as a whole have already been extensively explored from a theoretical standpoint (Spurr; Dlaska). The advantages include development of specific personal interests in exploring, and therefore acquiring the foreign or second (F/L2) language and culture within a context. The ultimate goal of using *realia* is to turn students into life-long learners of the target language and culture.

According to CALL research, digital *realia*, given their nature as multimedia, easily-accessible, persistent cultural artifacts, are particularly advantageous in reaching that goal (Smith). Compared to other digital *realia*, some specific video games add additional opportunities for language exploration. All such games, while similar in nature to movies (providing exposure to listening comprehension in the spoken dialogues and reading comprehension in the subtitles) also involve important additional features such as: writing and even speaking with other online users in the target language; direct interaction and agency, which improve learning skills (Deters et al.; Mitchell and Savill-Smith; Gee, *What Video Games* and “Good Video Games”); and critical thinking and problem-solving, which can be applied to physical group interaction in the classroom. For some games, interaction can also take place virtually, through online communication with other users around the world. As research has shown, group interaction centered on problem solving is highly conducive to learning (Wenger) and language acquisition in particular (Nunan).

In recent years the potential of digital gaming as a learning device has been explored in a variety of fields (Craton), including language acquisition (Purushotma, Thorne, and Wheatley). Scholars

however have so far placed emphasis on so-called “serious gaming,” that is to say games that were specifically designed for learning purposes (Abt; Reinhardt, Warner, and Lange; Neville; Blake). A few other scholars have explored the learning potential of some specific areas of online gaming (including language acquisition), namely Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* (Ramaa et al.; Benassi et al.; Jang and Ryu), or virtual persistent online worlds such as *Second Life* (Wang, Burton, and Falls). Research on the role of commercially-available games for computers and consoles in education/learning, on the other hand, is currently limited, and none, at present, focuses on language acquisition. Only one of the articles in the publications of the Digital Game Research Association (DiGRA),² deals with language acquisition in terms of serious gaming (Sørensen and Meyer), while many other articles focus on the general subject of learning. Exploring the advantages of commercially-available, mass-produced video games is a new field. The most interesting contributions in this new field, so far, explore the general topic of game-based learning (Farber) and has informed much of my pedagogical approach.

While I have researched gamification, I favor game-based learning (GBL). I believe that gamification (teachers turning lessons into a game they designed) is merely a revamped reward system. Even a rich reward system is not an actual teaching method, rather it is a motivational tool. Motivation is important to encourage learning, but it does not actually do the teaching. GBL, on the other hand, is pedagogy, closely connected to play theory. In GBL learners apply critical thinking. I believe that some current commercially-available cinematic video games, commonly sold in stores can serve as excellent *realia* in GBL and enhance language acquisition in and outside the classroom. Besides critical thinking applied to interaction, task-based learning and agency, cinematic games also have an important additional learning component of a detailed narrative. This is a common trait to cinematic games. They all have a fairly complex, engaging story line, and a mystery/quest that unfolds as the player interacts with gameplay. Scholars have underlined the importance and the advantages afforded by such narratives in F/L2 (Polkinghorne; Bruner; Pomerantz; Kramersch). Narrative approaches to F/L2 language acquisition research stem from the premise that human beings are storytellers (Polkinghorne). Jerome Bruner notes that people apprehend reality and organize knowledge by means of narrative structures and, furthermore, that these structures are the primary mode of communication underlying all human interaction. Narratives in F/L2

have the benefit of engaging the learner by adding an additional layer of context that challenges the reader to follow characters and events as they unfold thorough the story. In cinematic video games, such challenges are heightened, in a way, by the interactive nature of the narrative as it is presented. This concept of game player agency in connection with narratives has been explored in “serious games” research focused on game design, involving the creation of specific games aimed at fostering language learning (Sykes and Reinhardt; Neville). There is currently no relevant research on the use of narratives for language acquisition in commercially-available video games.³

Rather than being another theoretical contribution in the area of language pedagogy, this article aims instead at presenting a *practicum*. In this essay I will provide evidence that utilizing some current video games that have an emphasis on communication can be conducive to F/L2 acquisition. In fact, I have successfully utilized particular video games in my teaching since 1997, and, as a learner of foreign languages myself since the early 1980s, with games that were much more primitive and limited than the ones available today. More specifically, I will provide examples of how for the past three years I have successfully incorporated two cinematic games, Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed II* and Quantic Dream’s *Heavy Rain* into my teaching practice in the language classroom.⁴ Based on my teaching experience, the use of video games and other related *realia* (gaming websites and magazines, YouTube videos, Facebook groups) has been an effective didactic tool for reinforcing linguistic skills and exposing students to Italian culture. I will then share technical advice and best practices related to pedagogical applications of gaming in F/L2 and culture acquisition. Finally, I will discuss the development of a gaming-centered intensive language and culture learning course that I have created, aimed at attracting self-identified gamers.

While gaming in the language classroom is, by its nature, an experience that is limited in terms of time that could be dedicated to it, cinematic games are a medium that has the potential to turn our students’ living space (and, possibly, through handheld or portable gaming devices, virtually any place) into a potentially persistent, easily and always accessible language lab (very much fitting the concept of the “ubiquitous language lab.” This is an aspect that I find particularly relevant nowadays, given the current pervasive presence of internet-connected portable multimedia devices (Bregni, “Using”; Chinnery; Bo-Kristensen and Meyer). Compared to other *realia*, I believe that

cinematic games can better assist instructors in the goal of transforming students into life-long learners of (a) F/L2 language(s) (Smith).⁵

2. Using Video Games in the Italian Language Classroom

At present, video games have been one of the many digital *realia* to which I expose my students in our weekly language lab meetings. Since I began my experimentations with video games in the language classroom in 1997, I observed that video game-based activities seemed to engage students well, and that the games had the advantage of fostering group cooperation and active participation better than simpler web-based activities. Compared to other lab activities, agency and problem-solving seemed the two keys that enhance student cooperation. Over the last three years, thanks to more communicative-oriented games becoming available, I decided to further my experimentations with game-based learning and verify the results by performing outcomes assessment on the game-based activities I created. My language-classroom experiences over the last three years with Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed (AC) II*, *AC Brotherhood*, and *AC Revelations* (the so-called "Ezio Collection," three games set in Renaissance Italy with the protagonist Ezio Auditore), and Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* have produced excellent results. I organized lab activities⁶ that worked well when combined with preliminary work-sheets focusing on new vocabulary and reinforcing verbal forms and follow-up activities on the e-learning platform Blackboard, all aimed at reinforcing/fostering effective language learning and practice.

Shortly after its release in fall 2009, I realized that any US copy of *AC II* for Sony PlayStation 3 contained full content in Italian: voice-acting, subtitles, menus, even the in-game database function which provides accurate historical information on people and places. While *AC II* is a complex game, which takes 20+ hours to complete, it is also a fairly accessible game, in that given the nature of its gameplay even non-gamers can easily pick up the controller and start playing. It is a game intended for mature audiences (Mature – 17+ ESRB: www.esbr.org in the US; PEGI 18: www.pegi.info in Europe) due to content and language. It is therefore not recommended for high-school students; although, if deemed appropriate, depending upon the learning environment and student population, I would probably consider it for a senior high-school class. After researching its content, I selected the first twenty or so minutes of gameplay and created worksheets for utilization in two 50-minute lab sessions in my third-semester Italian class. The first

ten or so minutes of the game serve as introduction to the background scenario. The story is told through video cut-scenes: two secret societies have been fighting each other for centuries. One of them, the Templars (not the historical religious order), aims to enslave humanity, while the other, the Assassins (not the historical Muslim sect) has been fighting to defend them. The main character, Desmond, thanks to some futuristic machinery called *Animus* can access his ancestors' memories, encoded in his own DNA, and learn the special abilities they possessed as highly-trained members of the Assassins society.⁷ The material included in this section of the game would allow me to reinforce and expand recently-learned vocabulary (war and conflict; verbs related to sports and physical activities (*correre, saltare, cadere, etc.*); to review some recently-covered grammar content in context (present tense, *passato prossimo*, and imperfect of regular and irregular verbs); and to introduce the Italian Renaissance as a cultural component (by virtually exploring Florence under the Medici in 1476). I treated *AC II* as any other *realia* I have used in my teaching since I began as a graduate instructor in 1994. I believe that digital *realia* should not replace “regular” teaching, but could be used to reinforce grammatical, as well as cultural points (Bregni, “In Praise” and “Enhancing”). So, I created task-based worksheets informed by the principle of scaffolding (building upon what students already know, moving from simple to more complex elements and then expanding to include new materials) and task-based learning. For this lab activity, I bring a PlayStation (PS) 3 console to class,⁸ which is the Super Slim model that is lightweight and reasonably easy to carry around, connect, and begin running. I use the provided HDMI cable (one simple, small connector that carries both video and audio signals in high-definition) to connect to the classroom video projector. As class begins, I instruct students to access the online learning platform Blackboard and retrieve an activity work-sheet I created. The first section introduces basic video game vocabulary in Italian (*il videogioco, il disco, il disco rigido, il joypad/il controller, etc.*), and has a brief overview of the game in Italian. New vocabulary is highlighted. I then add a fill-in-the-gaps exercise that uses context to elicit expressions of support (*Bravo/a! Perfetto!*); of concern (*Attenzione! Attento/a!*) and of disappointment (*Accidenti! Che peccato!*). Many of the words are cognates, or already familiar to students. I included images for the less-common words to foster comprehension. For example, I used an image of a controller juxtaposed to the fill-in-the-blank exercise to set vocabulary related to directions (*avanti, indietro, destra, sinistra*) and actions (*corri, salta, apri*) within the specific context of gaming. Since the first, immediate

goal was to encourage students' participation in the target language during lab, I set up a process in which I would elicit volunteers to do the actual gaming. I explain that one student will physically hold the game pad while other students will "guide" him/her through a series of commands (*Salta! Gira a destra! Apri il cassetto a sinistra! Chiudi la porta!* ...and so on) and offer comments. Not all students in the classroom would be video game fans and/or familiar with gameplay on a video game console. Each volunteer gamer will hold the pad for approximately five minutes, and then pass the pad to another student. The rest of the class would participate by encouraging the player, providing hints, offering suggestions, expressing satisfaction and support, or relating disappointment and disagreement.

As *AC II* begins, we meet Desmond, a 21st-century 25-year-old man who wakes up in a Templar research facility. He learns he is being kept captive by a secret society, the Templars, and that they have nefarious intentions. He learns that he has a secret the Templars want to steal, his ancestors' valuable memories that are encoded in his DNA. Desmond's escape is being aided by a young woman who, as we learn, is on his side. She instructs him to follow her. From this point on, she will be issuing a series of commands, an excellent opportunity to reinforce imperatives. The game can be paused at any time, and students, through a series of exercises such as fill-in-the-blanks, group repetition, and role-play, can practice vocabulary and verb forms, with additional expansion and follow-up exercises that will further reinforce acquisition, partially done in class and partially assigned as homework. To that purpose, I add another set of activities to the worksheet I created that would engage students in all major areas of language acquisition:

1. Listening comprehension: I created a fill-in-the-gaps exercise based on the text of the protagonist's initial monologue in the game's opening, which presents the story's premise and the protagonists' role. I added YouTube links to users' play-through videos of that specific section of the game, so that students could watch the video cut-scenes again for follow-up exercises. I then created a series of true/false questions based on the monologue.
2. Vocabulary expansion: the initial monologue offered the opportunity to reinforce war/conflict-related vocabulary. My fill-in-the-gaps and association-based exercises presented cognates first (*guerra, combattere, fazioni*), then images juxtaposed to the text would introduce new, more complex vocabulary (words such as *schiaivizzare* and *lottare*)

3. Reading comprehension: I created a text which summarizes the premise and plot of the game, then added a series of open questions based on the text, which students had to respond to using full sentences.
4. Grammar: Using the protagonist's narrative as a model, I created a series of short (5 sentences each) exercises (complete the sentence using the correct form of the verb in the infinitive; or change the subject and modify the verb accordingly) aimed at reinforcing the conjugation of action/sports-related verbs (*correre, saltare, cadere, colpire...*), and the difference between *passato prossimo* and imperfect.
5. Speaking: I asked my students to discuss in groups the possible outcome of the conflict as presented in the game and share their conversation with the class. Since students at this level (and at this point in the semester) would not have learned the future tense or the "if" clause as yet, I offered the model of "*Secondo me, vincono... perchè...*"
6. Writing: the premise of the game is that two factions fight over control of magical artifacts. I asked students to provide an example of magical artifact they could imagine useful within the game context, and to describe its powers (would it win the conflict, would it destroy the enemy, or would it create peace?)

Sections 1 through 3 would require approximately 30 minutes total and were divided between the two 50-minute lab periods I reserved for this activity. The rest of the time in day one would be devoted to gaming. On day two, the last ten minutes of class were devoted to section 5. Section 6 was assigned as homework. To the six sections above, meant for linguistic competence, I added an extra cultural component exercise: an in-class discussion of the Italian Renaissance as it emerges in the game. The discussion was preceded by a brief pre-activity multiple-choice questionnaire. More recently, I have used the free online platform Kahoot! (<https://kahoot.com/>) as an easy way to make my questionnaires accessible to students, who can easily and efficiently respond using their mobile phones, tablets, or pc. Kahoot! is also a useful tool in performing assessment, as it records statistics related to students' answers. Questions were aimed at gauging what my students already knew about the Italian Renaissance and to assist them in focusing on relevant elements of the game narrative they were about to experience. The key questions were:

1. What was life expectancy in Renaissance Italy?
2. Why did the Arts thrive in Florence under the Medici?

3. Could women hold positions of relevance in Renaissance Italian culture?

A brief analysis of the storyline and gameplay of *AC II* would reveal why I selected those questions as key to cultural acquisition. By playing the game, we learn that Desmond, through a machine called Animus, can re-live the life of his fifteenth-century ancestor Ezio Auditore. Students engage in the life of Ezio, a 20-something male from an affluent family, wandering around a historically accurate rendition of Florence in 1476 under the Medici rule. They meet and interact with its citizens. The game is then paused in order to take a closer look at the non-playable characters, the citizens of Florence. While the storyline is fictional, the cultural reconstruction is accurate, from the reconstruction of the cityscape and its monuments, to the relevant events and characters, down to clothing and details of everyday life at the time. My students have the opportunity to observe that many people wandering about Florence are clearly over 40 years old. Again, the game is paused, and students are invited to reflect on what they have observed in the environment that could contribute to a longer life expectancy. I guide my students to observe a cityscape that is visibly thriving thanks to an era of relative peace, successful commerce, and a healthy lifestyle; the ancient Roman infrastructures that provided clean water and sanitation; and the mild Italian climate that provided plentiful crops. Then my students take part in the vivid cultural and political Florentine life, observing first-hand that Italian cities are built around the *piazza*, hence the plentiful opportunities for exchange of ideas. They encounter Lorenzo and are guided to observe that for enlightened rulers like him, fostering the Arts meant visibly expressing nobility and power through sophistication, education and refined taste. Finally, my students are given the opportunity to reflect on the role of women in Italian Renaissance society by encountering women in positions of power (Maria, Ezio's mother) interacting with cultural icons of the time (young Leonardo da Vinci, who in 1476 was just starting to explore fields other than the visual arts). An invaluable aid to students' cultural learning is offered by the in-game database feature that is accessible by pausing the game at any point. The database offers accurate historical information on people and places encountered as the game progresses, so students can learn more about the Medici family, for example, and their feud with the Pazzi, and monumental landmarks such as Ponte Vecchio, its architecture and history.

I also used *AC II* in my fifth semester language course during two 50-minute lab sessions. Given the heightened knowledge of the language, we were able to cover more of the game (approximately the

first 40 minutes of gameplay). Activities in the specific worksheet I created were centered on reinforcing “if” clauses and hypotheses (Why was Desmond involved? How could he recall his ancestor’s memories? If you could, which side would you choose, and why? etc.). Finally, in my English-language Renaissance Italian literature course I used the first part of the Ezio storyline (in English, with English subtitles) as a general introductory session on the Italian Renaissance.

Quantic Dream’s *Heavy Rain (HR)* is another cinematic game was also effective in my class experimentations over the last three years.⁹ The first thirty or so minutes of this engaging interactive drama/action-adventure video game, provide an excellent opportunity to review vocabulary related to parts of the house, furniture, family, and related activities. I used it towards the end of my third-semester Italian course, shortly after students would have learned the future tense and its use to express probability. As the game begins, the player takes control of the first of four protagonists, Ethan Mars, a 40-something architect with a wife and two kids. We find ourselves in Ethan’s bedroom. He lives in a house with a garden. Ethan is sleeping in his bedroom on the second floor. At this point, on-screen prompts encourage the player to wake up Ethan through a series of controller key inputs; then to get him showered, dressed and go down to the kitchen to have breakfast. As Ethan, the player can explore all parts of the house; open closets and drawers; look outside windows, open doors and go outside to the garden; even go to Ethan’s studio where we are given the option to have him work on a design project at his drawing table. As his wife and kids return home, Ethan then engages in conversations with his family through a series of multiple-choice dialogue options. He is asked to perform some chores around the house and then goes out to play with his kids. Like in the previous example, a worksheet with preliminary exercises can familiarize students with the new vocabulary and verbal forms, and follow-up exercises can test for listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. So, I used this section as the basis for the following activities on the worksheet I created and then shared with my students on the online learning platform Blackboard:

1. Listening comprehension: I created a fill-in-the-gaps exercise based on the text of the protagonists’ initial monologue in the game’s opening, in which he reads a letter left by his wife, and then talks to himself as he begins his day. As with *AC*, I included YouTube links to users’ play-through videos of that specific section of the game, where students can watch the video cut-

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scenes again, for follow-up exercises. Then, I created a series of true/false questions based on the monologue.

2. Vocabulary expansion: the initial sequence offered the opportunity to reinforce vocabulary related to relationship, family, morning routines and work. As usual, my fill-in-the-gap and association-based exercises presented cognates first, then I inserted images in the text to introduce new, more complex vocabulary in context.
3. Reading comprehension: I created a text which summarizes the premise and plot of the game, then added a series of open questions based on the text, to which students had to respond using full sentences.
4. Grammar: Using the protagonist's monologue and his dialogue with his wife and children as models, I created a series of short (5 sentences each) exercises (complete the sentence using the correct form of the verb in the infinitive; or answer the question and modify accordingly) aimed at reinforcing the conjugation of morning routine verbs (including reflexive verbs: *alzarsi, vestirsi, farsi la doccia, preparare la colazione, aiutare in cucina, etc.*); house chores and spare-time related verbs; and the difference between reflexive verbs (*prepararsi*) and reciprocal verbs (*aiutarsi*).
5. Speaking: I asked my students to discuss in groups what would happen next in Ethan's and his family's day (the eldest child's birthday party, going out for dinner, etc.), and share their conversation with the class. Since students at this level and at this point in the semester would have learned the future tense (but not the "if" clause yet), I offered the model: "*E poi, cosa faranno? Secondo me, la festa... perchè...; e poi per cena...*" This section was covered at the end of the second 50-minute lab, after approximately 20-25 minutes of gaming.
6. Writing: the premise of the game is that something terrible is about to happen to Ethan and his family. I asked students to provide an educated guess of what could happen, but also provide an alternative happy outcome, using the future of probability, which students would have already learned at this point (for example, "*Succederà qualcosa al figlio Sean. Sean si perderà. Ma Ethan lo troverà e tutto finirà bene*".)

These are just a few examples of possible activities. Other video games that I will mention shortly (and many similar video games that are coming out every year) contain plenty of opportunities to reinforce a

variety of grammatical forms and explore new vocabulary. They can be used at all levels, in one form or another, and as a lab or classroom activity in a regular or hybrid/blended course (part online, part regular instruction). Exercises and activities can be based on any of the features of cinematic games, interactive multimedia (video, audio, text) experiences involving adventure and exploration, which, in summary, offer opportunities for listening comprehension, reading comprehension (text and subtitles), vocabulary expansion and problem solving/multiple choice.

After each game-based activity, I performed assessment in the form of testing (a written test that included materials that were previously covered in class through traditional methods and reinforced by the gaming activity as direct measure), as well as both a preliminary and exit survey (as indirect measures). The preliminary survey asked students about their interest in video games, or lack thereof, and also about other types of digital *realia* they may be using: music videos, online newspapers and magazines, Facebook groups, etc.; the exit survey asked them how they felt about the game-based lab activities in relation to their learning. All of the students who responded to the post-activity survey over the last three years stated that they greatly enjoyed the video game-centered lab activities (approximately 95% thought it was excellent) and approximately 93% of them felt that they had learned very much from the activity. Even students who, in the short pre-activity survey, declared that they did not like (or hated) video games, expressed appreciation for the activity and selection of material. Post-activity test performance showed a 9 percentage point increase in the median score for the class. Outcomes assessment in my Renaissance Italian literature course, taught in English, showed similar positive results. Students demonstrated a similar median score increase on the “Intro to the Italian Renaissance” test; and in the exit survey they all declared that they very much appreciated the activity, which shed light on cultural elements they would not otherwise be able to learn from a textbook or a documentary. I asked students to provide examples of such occurrences (“In which way does Florence in 1476, as it is presented in the game, differ from your experience of city life in present-day America?”). Many of my American students would not have had the opportunity to visit Europe yet at that point. Several comments mentioned that they observed the heightened social interaction afforded by the nature of Italian cities (built around the “piazza”); others spoke about differences in everyday life (merchants’ shops at every street corner and the types of goods they sold; the very visible presence of clergy around town); but some (namely, students who

had already studied abroad) also mentioned culturally-authentic instances of social interaction, such as friends expressing their familiarity by greeting each other by kissing on both cheeks. The class discussion that followed survey results was very lively, with students who had studied abroad sharing that they noticed how in-game characters greeted each other by kissing, in the same manner that their Italian friends and people they saw in the streets would do.

3. Other Suitable Cinematic and Non-Cinematic Games

I have selected a number of other games, currently on the market, that feature appealing, complex narratives, possess a task-based, problem-solving orientation, and present full voice-acted conversations between characters, all features that are key in stimulating learning and meaningful interactions in the language classroom setting.

All the main games in the AC series lend themselves very well to game-based activities in F/L2 and culture courses. The first game in the series, *AC: Altair's Chronicles* (2008), took full advantage of technical advancements afforded by the new, at the time, generation of consoles (PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) and more powerful Windows PCs, presented players with a historical fiction that unfolded in an action-adventure, open world video game. The success was such that the game turned into a series, which at presents counts nine episodes plus a number of supporting "side stories," each set in different eras and areas of the world. Other recent incarnations of game series that started in the late 1990s such as *Tomb Raider* have also recently evolved into full voice-acted, complex narratives. Among the current or recent games, those that represent the best fully interactive, multi-media, digital narrative cinematic games for Italian language and culture courses are:

- Sony's (developed by Quantic Dream) *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls* (known in Italy as *Beyond: Due anime*) (respectively, 2010 and 2013 for the PlayStation (PS) 3, and 2016 for the PS4 version).
- Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed II*, for PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One Microsoft Windows and Mac OS (2009-2016), and its direct sequels, *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, for PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Microsoft Windows, and Mac OS (2010-2016), and *Assassin's Creed Revelations* (for PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Microsoft Windows, and Mac OS (2011-2016).
- Square Enix's *Tomb Raider*, for PS3, Xbox 360 and Microsoft Windows (2013), and its direct sequel, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*,

initially an Xbox One exclusive (2015), and now available also for PS4 and PC.

For the language teacher interested in teaching ESL, I highly recommend the outstanding *Life is Strange* by Square Enix, an exciting, highly playable, complex and challenging tale of an 18-year-old girl who discovers she has the ability to rewind time, thus changing destinies and lives. Unfortunately, Italian is only available for optional subtitles, not as an in-game spoken language.¹⁰ These are all games that I have or will use in my class instruction. They, in my view, present the best scenario for F/L2 acquisition. The games I select, besides having engaging narratives (with *Assassin's Creed II* and *Revelations* and *Brotherhood* even offering outstanding overviews of Italian Renaissance history and culture), also conform to my own personal rules on teaching through video games, which is no war games nor any horror games. While there is some graphic violence in all games, they are still suitable for the average college student population, with ratings ranging from Teen through Mature (18+).¹¹

Some of the games I have mentioned date back as far as 2008. Keeping up to date with the latest video game offerings is not a requirement. In the gaming world, “retro” is cool. Also, we should bear in mind that given the Teen/Mature ratings of those games (or other similar games); many of our present-day students would not have been of suitable age to have experienced those games when they were first available. An additional advantage in using older games is that many of them are available at a much cheaper price than current releases, and often via convenient digital delivery.

The primary reason I chose and recommend the above-mentioned games, however, is because they all have a higher emphasis on storytelling/narrative, animated scenes and voice acting, and more “casual gamer” oriented gameplay that does not require much in terms of previous experience with gaming. Any student can potentially take the controller and proceed through a section of the game. This is even more likely for students with some gaming experience, which at this point in time is the most likely scenario with our students.

I have not had the chance to explore online communication capabilities in the language classroom yet, but some of the games I mentioned even offer real-time online interaction with other players in the form of writing and even online chat with gamers in other areas of the world, including Italian speakers. I encouraged my students to explore this on their own. *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, for example, allows in-game chat in online multiplayer mode. Most of the games that

allow in-game chat (audio, sometimes even video) tend to be MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* or Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs) such as the very popular *League of Legends*; but other type of games, such as driving games like *Forza Motorsports 6* on Xbox One and *DriveClub* on PS4, or the multi-platform fighting game *Street Fighter IV* also allow for global in-game chat. Sometimes players engage in real-time, camera-enabled chats via Skype or similar platforms, such as Mumble, Vent, and TeamSpeak.

While I am not presently convinced that online gaming chat would be beneficial in a regular classroom environment (activities could be organized to include in-game chats in an online course or in a course specifically aimed at video gamers, as I will later discuss), I have encouraged my students who play such games to explore in-game chats with fellow Italian-speaking gamers. After all, shared interests foster communication in the target language.

There are hundreds of other games and franchises that, while not possessing all the language-immersive features of cinematic games, still present animated, spoken cut scenes and/or in-game text in the target language. For the pre-college student population, superhero-based video games such as the excellent *Batman: Arkham* series (Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment 2009-2016), the ever-popular *Spider-man* series, and the fun and engaging Disney-based adventures of Square-Enix's *Kingdom Hearts* series are attractive to many gamers of all ages. For K-12 students, I highly recommend the *Lego* video game series (including the recent excellent toy-to-life *Lego Dimensions* game; all multi-platform). I have personally used, and would recommend, recent entries in these franchises to independent language learners and, possibly, at least in some form, for classroom use. *Lego Dimensions*, in particular, has very attractive features and the added toy-to-life interactivity (in which real, physical Lego toys are used to interact with the video game) that could work very well with children of all ages!

4. “But is it Feasible?” Technical Advice and Best Practices

The short answer today is yes, it is feasible to use video games in the language classroom. Recent advances have simplified things for the language teacher (or the adventurous student) willing to explore F/L2 language acquisition through video games. The advent of HDMI audio/video connections (one simple, small cable capable of delivering high-definition audio and video) has made it possible to purchase a video game console in any part of the world and have it work in any of the four

main regions (US, Europe, Asia, Australia).¹² This advancement also produced the result of eliminating differences in TV signals (NTSC, Pal, Secam), and including more streamlined content in games (i.e. multiple languages available, regardless of the area in the world where games are purchased). So, it is no longer necessary to purchase a video game console in a foreign standard in order to enjoy games in that foreign language, as was often the case in the past. With gaming becoming the massive, world-wide phenomenon that it has, more languages have been encoded in video games as a default option. In many cases, just setting a US game console's language to Italian will have the result of having the inserted game disc play in Italian (either all of it, such as game options, videos, subtitles, multiple-choice questions, etc., or selected sub-portions, generally subtitles and menus).

However, there are some issues and limitations. The first limitation is that there are technical problems that can arise, such as lack of language-specific content in the locally-sold version of the game (i.e. a US-bought copy of the game that lacks content in Italian language, which may be available in the version sold in Italy), or region compatibility (i.e. a game purchased in Italy that would not work on a US console). Until recently, games bought in Italy, featuring Italian dialogue and voice acting not available in the US version, would not work on US systems; that is generally no longer the case, as we will see. Second, not all gaming content can be suitable for our students. Third, one can quickly come across as “flaky” and ill-prepared if one does not have a clearly-defined lesson plan that connects the game to the specific language acquisition goals. Fourth, in my experience, video games are not a medium that can “speak” to an entire class all of the time.

Let us examine the above issues more in detail.

1. If I set my US PS3 console system's language to Italian (which can be easily done from the main on-screen menu), it will play *AC II* entirely in Italian when a US copy of the game is inserted and Italian is selected as the in-game language. But that will not be the case with *AC* on PS4, which will require an Italian-bought copy of the game in order to play content in Italian. With some other games also, such as PS4 *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls/Due anime*, an Italian copy of the game disc is needed in order to play the game in Italian.¹³ The game will play fine on a US NTSC console because the PS4 is region-free, meaning it can play game discs from any area of the world. Of the current video game consoles, all of the Nintendo Wii U games and most of the games for the Xbox 360 are region-encoded, meaning that,

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for example, Italian games will not play on a US console; while PS3, PS4, Xbox 360 and Xbox One are all region-free, meaning that a game from any region will work fine on a system from any other region. Only digital downloads (extra levels and optional add-ons) are region-specific.¹⁴

In my opinion, the region-free abilities and the wider selection of current (or updated in high-definition) cinematic games of the PlayStation 4 system make it the best option currently available on the market for playing the games I mentioned. Relatively inexpensive (currently around \$349 for the standard model), the PS4 is reliable and easy to set up and play.

The cinematic games I recommended above will all play fully in Italian. Some, however, require the purchase of an Italian copy of the game:

- *AC II, Brotherhood and Revelations* on PS3: a US copy of the game will play in Italian on a US console. Set the console language to Italian. Select Italian language and subtitles from the game's Options menu. On PS4: an Italian copy is needed.
- *Heavy Rain, Beyond: Two Souls,¹⁵ Rise of the Tomb Rider, Tomb Rider (2013)*: an Italian copy of the game is needed. It will play fine on a US console (or a console from any other region). Set the console language to Italian. If need be, select Italian as language from the in-game option screen.

Most of the cinematic games I have mentioned were created with English as the main in-game language. As a result, lip-syncing in voice acting through those games was designed for the English language. As any language instructor knows, observation of lip movements assists in listening comprehension (Kellerman; Gullberg; Bregni, "Enhancing"). This is an important limitation until more games are created specifically for the Italian market. That said, Italian voice-over artists are renowned worldwide for their superior technical expertise, and this shines through in cinematic games. Ubisoft, Sony and all major publishers clearly have done an excellent job with their Italian voice-overs. That said, in all the cinematic games I have recommended, co-speech gestures, another essential component of communication and F/L2 acquisition (Kelly, Manning, and Rodak) is excellent, and it definitely is a visual aid that enhances

overall student comprehension. In terms of potential acquisition of cultural elements specific to Italian culture, besides the excellent cultural components of *AC II*, *Brotherhood* and *Revelations*,¹⁶ there are very few games that are set in Italy, and even fewer that include accurate, relevant elements of Italian culture. From 2000 to the present, only *Tomb Raider 5: Chronicles* (PS1, Sega Dreamcast, PC; adventure/exploration game), *The Italian Job* (PS1, PC; a racing game), *Casanova: Il duello della rosa nera* (a 2001 PC adventure game set in 18th century Venice), *Hitman 2* (PS2, Xbox, Nintendo GameCube, PC; a war game) and *Sniper Elite 4* (PS4, Xbox One, PC, 2016; a war game) are set in Italy and provide some elements of Italian history and culture. Given that most video games are currently produced with English, or, in some cases, Japanese as the main in-game language, while cinematic games (including the outstanding *Life is Strange* by Square Enix, for PS4, Xbox One, PC), are, in my view, still very usable and beneficial for the acquisition of Italian and languages other than English, they become an outstanding tool for ESL and Japanese language instruction.¹⁷

2. As a general piece of advice to teachers exploring video games as an instructional tool, I recommend doing some extensive preliminary research on any selected video game. First of all, I would suggest that you follow the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB; www.esrb.com) ratings for objectionable language and other possible sensitive content. Another good resource is the excellent www.ign.com, one of the leading websites devoted to video games. It is available in multiple languages and regional incarnations, such as www.it.ign.com. Finally, play through videos, uploaded by individual game players on YouTube, are an excellent way to preview materials. Some gamers also include their commentaries, which can also be an interesting way to expose students to authentic spoken language in context.
3. There must be solid preliminary work done involving the creation of vocabulary worksheets, listening and reading comprehension exercises, and follow-up activities that should take place before each video game-based class activity. Reinforcing materials that have been recently learned through traditional methods is the most effective use of digital *realia* (Smith). The cinematic games I recommended contain materials

diverse enough to contribute to reinforcing most fundamental aspects of grammar and vocabulary. There are currently no textbooks (or other scholarly articles, for that matter) that could provide a “data bank” of suitable games and exercises for F/L2 acquisition. In future efforts, I hope to produce such a textbook that would include game recommendations and specific exercises/tests for elementary through intermediate language courses.

4. Some students are bound to be either unfamiliar with or just not care much about video games and playing them could be a complex task for some of them. The solution I envisioned, as I mentioned, is to elicit volunteers to do the actual gaming and encourage the rest of the class to participate by encouraging the players. That said, realize that both the student population and the games are rapidly evolving and that gaming continues to become a more pervasive part of the lives of our students. Also, many of the games I described fall in the so-called “casual gamer” category, a grouping that has been targeted by game designers for about the last ten years. The “casual gamer” is a person, regardless of age and gender, who would not self-identify as a gamer, and is a user who, regardless of previous gaming experience, could basically pick up a controller and start playing the game in question within minutes.

The language teacher willing to explore video games as an F/L2 acquisition medium, but who feels that s/he does not possess enough know-how, should bear in mind that technical help is available at each of our learning institutions. I confess that even I, who have been playing video games since they first became available in the early 70's, do not know everything about video games. However, there is institutional help available:

- There are structures in place to assist the teacher willing to explore new media: Information Technology Services (ITS) at any institution of higher learning will most likely have personnel that could serve as a resource, and/or be willing to become one, having the specific know-how to research the topic and share knowledge.
- Yes, there is an age gap between us (the teachers) and them (our students), but it can be used to our advantage as language instructors because students can be used as resources. We instructors can learn from them about

what games could be good or beneficial, and what games they are interested in.

- We can use gaming-related online resources such as websites as a primary source for our preliminary research.¹⁸

5. Intensive Italian for Gamers—A Work-in-Progress

My experiments in introducing video games as a learning device in the Italian as a foreign language classroom have led me to explore the option of teaching a full course specifically designed to attract a population of self-professed video gamers. In the fall of 2016, as the recipient of a Saint Louis University Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning Fellowship Award, I worked with the Center personnel to further develop second-language acquisition strategies using commercially-available video games and related media, including social media. The course, the very first of its kind, was taught in the spring of 2017. I used the SLU state-of-the-art multimedia Learning Studio at the Reinert Center to teach *Intensive Italian for Gamers*. The course, which provided two semesters of language requirement in one semester, was re-designed to specifically attract and respond to the interests of video game players willing to satisfy their language requirement, which at my institution is typically comprised of three semesters for the College of Arts and Sciences, and two semesters for other Colleges and Schools. Such a course was created to increase enrollments in Italian by attracting a specific student population. By completing two semesters in one, students enrolled in the course “merge” with students coming from the regular track, thus helping us address lower enrollments in third-semester Italian at our institution. *Intensive Italian for Gamers* combines traditional intensive language instruction with video game-based classroom and online interaction that will integrate the “five C’s” principles of the National Standards for Foreign Language Education (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities) as applied to the four basic skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing), plus Intercultural Competence as the fifth skill. This is based on the pedagogical premise that language acquisition is a process that involves, and benefits from, daily interactions outside the classroom, the course targets students who already spend a portion of their free time playing video games.

The course has a blended/hybrid format. I selected and test-piloted a newly-adopted textbook with a connected online learning

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system (Pearson's *Percorsi* and *MyItalianLab*). The course met three times a week for 50-minutes, with an extra 50-minute lab period. During regular class meetings, students were exposed to traditional language instruction for the first 30 minutes, while the last 20 minutes were devoted to game-based activities aimed at reinforcing and expanding upon what had just been learned. Game-based activities were not limited to gaming only, but also included analysis of related digital *realia*, such as YouTube videos and online gaming magazines. During lab meetings, students conducted online-based, individual and small-group activities through related *realia* (such as videos, online gaming magazines, and game-creator apps) and that further expanded upon what had been recently learned. Working with the Reinert Center, I developed weekly class gaming worksheets and separate sets of bi-weekly lab activity worksheets. Worksheets followed the content of vocabulary and grammar as it is presented in *Percorsi* and *MyItalianLab*. I used scaffolding and task-based learning to organize the exercises included in my worksheets. Here are two examples:

- The first game-based activity is scheduled for week three of the semester. Students, at that point in this intensive course will have learned how to greet and introduce themselves; genders and numbers; definite and indefinite articles; *avere*, *essere*, and *-are* verbs; and some common descriptive adjectives. Weekly gaming activities will be based on *AC: The Ezio Trilogy*. Students will be guided to understand Desmond's and Ezio's monologues in which they introduce themselves and their mission. Relying on cognates first, then context and visual aids (images), students will be guided to reinforce vocabulary related to self-introduction, and acquire new vocabulary related to war and conflict. Exercises will ask students to provide definite articles, then masculine/feminine/singular/plural of the nouns and adjectives they just learned, with the purpose of reinforcing both the recently-acquired grammar and the newly-acquired vocabulary. Other exercises will reinforce *avere*, *essere*, and *-are* verbs as they are presented in the gaming narrative. In the connected lab activity, worksheets will guide students to create, working individually, their own avatar using one of the free Italian-language online avatar-creator services provided. After building their own character (human, alien, elf, robot, etc.), following the model of Ezio's presentation, students are guided to introduce their alter-ego avatar to the rest of the class.

- After five weeks of classes, students will have learned all three present-tense conjugations and idioms with *fare* and *avere*. Weekly gaming activities will be based on the first section of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*. Students will be guided to understand Lara Croft's monologue as she introduces herself and her mission, and her dialogues with her teammates. Relying on cognates first, then context and visual aids (images), students will be guided to acquire vocabulary related to traveling, exploration and outdoor activities (mountain climbing, hiking, skiing, etc.). Exercises that ask them to provide conjugations of verbs they recently learned will have the purpose of reinforcing both the newly-acquired vocabulary and the related grammar in context. Other exercises will reinforce idioms with *avere* and *essere* as they are presented in the gaming narrative. In the connected lab activity, worksheets will guide students to create a quiz game on Kahoot.com. Following the model of Lara Croft's presentation and dialogues, students are guided to create, working in small groups, a short Kahoot quiz in Italian that presents Lara in the process of performing one of her activities as an explorer (*scalare, sciare, saltare, esplorare*), with four multiple-choice possible answers, of which only one is correct. The other students must guess. The individual student and group with the highest score win.

Thanks to the support of the Reinert Center and my department's, students had access to a PS4 system and games in Italian both in their classroom and in the Language Resource Center in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures. A special section of the Center was reserved to function as a gaming lab. The cinematic games I recommended for purchase also include content in Spanish, French and German; some also offer Chinese, Portuguese, and Russian. Students from both my course and the department were to access gaming in the Center from 8am through 8pm weekdays.

I believed that targeting a specific student population that self-identifies as "gamers" through a video game-based language course would stimulate and enhance their learning process, hence the intensive nature of the course. After all, as language learning research confirms, we all become more excited and communicate more easily and effectively when in the company of people who share our same interests and passions (Dörnyei; Thorne, Black and Sykes).

The course could serve as a model for a mixed (traditional classroom; classroom "flipping"; media classroom; online instruction

through the e-learning platform Blackboard) learning model that could be applied to other languages and even other fields. After all, video games lend themselves to some interesting potential multidisciplinary developments in, among other subjects, anthropology, history, art, and architecture; just like how my students learn about fifteenth-century Florence, its architecture and art, the Medici, Leonardo da Vinci, etc. through *AC II*.

Could a video game-based course specifically targeting the gamer population be offered online? I believe so, with some caveats. I personally believe that classroom education is more beneficial than online, thanks to the face-to-face interaction. If I were to teach an online course, I would personally add a substantial component of real-life visual interaction through platforms such as the online platform Tegrity, which allows video recording and sharing, and Fuze, which allows online video conferencing.

6. Videogames are Here to Stay

I clearly recall how circa 1978 journalists in mainstream media across nations lamented the rise of the video game phenomenon, labeling it as a “fad.” Well, they were wrong. For decades now, video games have been a pervasive part of our culture. The popularity of smartphones and internet-connected handheld devices, and even “casual gaming” on social platforms (such as the ubiquitous *Candy Crush Saga* on Facebook and mobile platforms, which apparently is played by vast number of middle-aged/senior mothers and even grandmothers), all have contributed to making video games an integral part of our lives. Currently, the virtual reality (VR) revolution is about to take over the video gaming world. VR headset and related gear have been introduced for PC and new generation consoles are hitting the markets (PlayStation VR for PlayStation 4 was launched in Fall 2016). Accessible virtual reality is bound to open new frontiers for language learning. The experience of learning with video games can prepare students to interact with a fast-changing world in which digital *realia* become more and more pervasive and opportunities for F/L2 interactions more accessible. For example, soon it will be possible to virtually meet, and interact with, other player/users from other regions of the world and communicate with them in a virtual environment.

Video games can offer many advantages to language learners. I believe that including them in some form or another in our curriculum may help our students improve their F/L2 acquisition skills. Even one

video game-based activity per semester, in my experience, can turn what in some cases is a substantial part of our students' extra-curricular activities into an out-of-classroom/continuing learning experience.

Simone Bregni

SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

ENDNOTES

¹ According to the PEW Research Center, there are no substantial differences between male and female players. Only about 10% of adult Americans, however, consider themselves "gamers" Data are confirmed by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), which in its 2015 *Essential Facts about the Computer & Video Game Industry* added the following information: the average gamer is 30 years old; s/he has been playing for 13 years; 68% of gamers are 18 or older; 45% of all players are women; adult women represent a greater portion of the game-playing population (31%) than boys age 17 or younger (19%); 62% of gamers play games with others, either in-person or online; 77% of these gamers play with others at least one hour per week (ESA). Over 35% of college students play at least one hour per week (Craton).

² The first and foremost association for academics and professionals who research digital games and associated phenomena, founded in 2005, whose mission is to encourage "high-quality research on games, and promote collaboration and dissemination of work by its members" (www.digra.org).

³ See for example the publications of DiGRA, the Digital Game Research Association (<http://www.digra.org>). Juul focuses on early arcade video games such as *Space Invaders*. So does Gee, *What Video Games* and "Good Video Games." Early arcade games were too limited in nature to have actual narratives, especially compared to present cinematic games.

⁴ This article presents my classroom experimentations with GBL and video games conducted in the academic years 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2015-2016.

⁵ Personal experience has certainly proven fruitful in understanding the importance of video games on language acquisition. Playing narrative-oriented quests in video games, I was reading in a foreign language and applying my reading comprehension to problem solving, using writing to attain goals and solutions. My interest for video games also pushed me to explore other related *realia*, such as magazines and, later on, gaming websites for reviews, guides, tips and tricks. The personal interest I had for the topic bolstered language comprehension and new vocabulary acquisition in broader, related contexts (Bregni, "In Praise," "Enhancing," and "Using"). Spelling, grammar, and syntax did matter, and thus they improved.

⁶ In the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Saint Louis University core/language requirement courses and 300-level courses are taught 4 hours a week, one of which is language laboratory. 400-Level language courses typically meet 3 hours a week. Since 2000, all of the language laboratory hours in the Italian division include multimedia, digital *realia*-based activities that expand above and beyond regular class instruction.

⁷ Gameplay in Italian can be accessed at this link: <https://youtu.be/p1He0fkv3fk> (“Assassin’s Creed 2 (ITA) - 1 - Fuga dall’Abstergo”).

⁸ The game is currently available also on PS4, as part of the remastered “Ezio Collection,” along with *AC Brotherhood* and *Revelations*, all set in Renaissance Italy.

⁹ Available on Sony’s PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 4 only. Official website: <https://www.playstation.com/en-gb/games/heavy-rain-ps3/>. Web. 17 May 2016.

¹⁰ Hopefully a dialogue can be started with companies producing cinematic games that would encourage them to include more languages and better localization of their games (for example, to include language-specific, accurate lip-syncing). Other recent (2010-2016) cinematic games for the current systems that are suitable for language learning, but which contain horror or war themes (and as such do not fit my personal teaching style) are Naughty Dog’s *The Last of Us* (2013-2014) for PS3 and PS4; Supermassive Games’ *Until Dawn* (2015) for PS4; Remedy Entertainment’s *Alan Wake* (2010-2012) for Xbox 360 and PC. Telltale Games offers three multi-platform games: *The Walking Dead* (2012-2014); *The Wolf Among Us* (2013-2014) and *Tales from the Borderlands* (2014). These horror games follow an episodic format, and, like in other cinematic games such as *Life is Strange*, player choices and actions have significant effects on later story elements. Bend Studios’ *Days Gone*, which was just presented at E3 2016 on June 16, 2016, a PlayStation 4 exclusive, shows similar gameplay to *The Walking Dead*. Also, at E3 2016 Dontnod Entertainment, the creators of *Life is Strange*, presented *Vampyr* (PS4, Xbox One and PC), a horror-themed interactive adventure produced by Focus Home Interactive. A remastered version of Quantic Dream’s 2005 *Fahrenheit* (known as *Indigo Prophecy* in North America) has also been announced at E3 2016 for PS4.

¹¹ I suggest following the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB; www.esrb.com) ratings. See also below, in the section on technical advice.

¹² Only the addition of a simple, inexpensive electric converter (step up or step down) would be needed in case of country-specific differences in voltage.

¹³ While the two games are sold together on disc in Italy, they are only available as a digital download in the US, and Italian is not one of the languages available.

¹⁴ Until the PS2/original Xbox era, most games were region-encoded, and the only way to overcome the encoding was to modify the console with a specific chip (which, incidentally, would void warranty and it would be considered illegal in some areas). Regarding the Xbox 360, a simple internet search will reveal whether the game is region-free or not. The cinematic game *Alan Wake*, for example, is region-free: http://gaming.wikia.com/wiki/Region_Free_Xbox_360_Games.

¹⁵ Italian is not included as one of the available languages in the digital download versions of *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls*. Disc versions are not available in North America.

¹⁶ Historians specializing in Renaissance Italy were involved in their creation as consultants.

¹⁷ The upcoming remake of Sega’s *Shenmue* (originally available on the Sega Dreamcast, 2000) currently scheduled for release on PS4, for example, would be an outstanding learning tool for Japanese language and culture.

¹⁸ For Italian, I recommend the excellent multiplayer.it, spaziogames.it, gamesvillage.it, and gamesurf.tiscali.it.

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