

BRIDGING THE GAP:
*Transforming Knowledge
into Action through
Gaming and Simulation*

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35th Conference of the
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*Edited by Thomas Eberle, Willy Christian Kriz,
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Culture at play

M^a ÁNGELES ANDREU-ANDRÉS & MIGUEL GARCÍA-CASAS

The Socratic approach to teaching and learning by posing questions is one of the techniques of which simulation and gaming can take advantage. One of the main aims of our paper is not only to show the audience examples of a technique that can contribute to improving language competence but also to broaden our knowledge of the culture of the language by enjoying and experiencing the possibilities that our multimedia tool can offer either foreigners or native speakers of Castilian and Latin American Spanish. This technique can be also used in business, sciences or engineering by changing contents.

In the two games contained in the unit, we will be able, on the one hand, to ride back through history when helping love-struck Sir Nameless to find his damsel; on the other, we will be able to play against the machine (the computer) to discover where the hidden treasure is. The seven blocks on history; geography; science, technology and architecture; festivities, traditions and sports; literature; culture of the language; painting, sculpture, cinema and music will allow attendants to answer questions without previous knowledge of the culture as hints will help players infer the right responses. All through the demonstration of our games we will be able to discuss the possibilities of the tool, extra activities that could be carried out when having fun and learning, as well as talk about the origins of the idea that led to creating the games.

1. Introduction

According to Rubin (1975) a good language learner is an accurate guesser with a strong drive to communicate and willing to make mistakes to learn. Oxford & Crookall (1999) considered that, in addition to using different language learning strategies, good language learners show other advantageous characteristics as they use to be immersed in the culture of the target language, demonstrate high motivation and interest in languages and benefit from a stimulating learning environment. Among the language learning strategies they refer to, we would like to highlight the following:

Affection strategies (e.g. anxiety reduction)

Social strategies (e.g. asking questions)

Cognitive strategies for understanding and producing language (e.g. reasoning deductively)

Compensation strategies for overcoming knowledge limitations (e.g. guessing meaning, using synonyms or other production tricks to express oneself) as these strategies are mainly the ones we wish students to put into practice when playing with *Culture at play*.

2. What is Culture at play?

Culture at play (La Cultura en Juego) is the result of one of our latest projects on gaming that has been published: an educational multimedia tool in CD-ROM format designed and developed for either foreigners or native speakers of Castilian and Latin American Spanish to improve their language competence as well as to broaden their knowledge of the culture of this language. This multimedia software takes advantage of the Socratic approach to teaching and learning by posing questions, a technique that can also be used in business, sciences or engineering by changing contents. The aim of this paper is not to refer to the previous research carried out to select contents or the effort employed in its design and development –accomplished entirely by teachers, but to the parts it consists, the thematic blocks the player can enjoy and experience as well as to show some examples of the technique used.

3. Contents

There are two games, a teaching/learning guide, an editor in which to consult exercises and a recording facility with which to practice and improve the Spanish oral expression. Since both games share the same background content, on entering players are asked to choose from different blocks of topics on which they will face questions; these thematic blocks collect a selection of the most outstanding data regarding Spanish and Latin American culture on literature; painting, sculpture, cinema and music; history; architecture, science and technology; geography; festivities, traditions and sports; and culture of the language. The main goals of this software are to teach a language (Spanish in this case) basing on the culture of this language and to improve the students communicative skills with an intermediate or upper-intermediate level of competence, and no previous knowledge of the culture of this language, by posing questions that players can answer as clues help them deduce the responses. All questions, regardless of topic, consist of two parts. The first one offers an introductory text that can be heard and read at the same time or only heard –depending on the listening comprehension level of the player; in the second part, besides the question, a hint is offered to help learners infer the right answer.

4. Games

Apart from contents, as Joldersma (2000) suggests, in any game and in computer educational games in particular, imagination, make-believe, the story told, fun and excitement are basic elements that increase the students' commitment and motivation. In the two interactive multimedia games contained in the unit, *Del Amor, del Tiempo y de la Historia* (On Love, Time and History), and *El Tesoro* (The Treasure), we will be able, on the one hand, to ride back through history when helping love-struck Sir Nameless to find his damsel; on the other, we will be able to play against the machine (the computer) to discover where the hidden treasure is.

Del Amor, del Tiempo y de la Historia is the story of a knight, Sir Nameless (*Sinnombre*), who fell in love contemplating his beloved in a 500 year-old portrait. Her time ran out in the fifteenth century although there is only one place in the world in which the desperate heart of Nameless can reach his beloved: Memory's Magic Courtyard. There, with the help of God and his strength and thanks to the knowledge of the student player, this knight in armour will be able to ride through history to press his lips on those of his beloved or die in a timeless past and in a placeless place. However,... all of us can help Nameless.

This is the way the game starts inviting players to help Sir Nameless by enjoying and learning Spanish through the culture of the language. We are in the 21st century, Sir Nameless is 20 years old and we are in the Memory's Magic Courtyard, – a game board whose squares are fifteenth-century tiles typical of Paterna, a town in the province of Valencia (Spain), with figures of humans, angels, demons and real and fantastic animals. The token is Sir Nameless on his horse and players have to click to spin the die on screen that moves the token.

If the answers that players type in are correct, the knight will move closer to the 15th century but if they miss an answer, Sir Nameless will move farther away. For each mistake the knight will lose one year of age; so if he loses them all, he will not reach his beloved. When players reach the last square of this screen during the 15th century, they will go into the Chamber of When where Sir Nameless, with the learners' help, will be able to see his damsel if he discovers the time in the hour glass, the treasure chest of life and love in his heart. Learners must move Sir Nameless' horse with the buttons of this second screen (an ancient clock) and place it on an hour they choose. If they answer correctly, they will find out whether one of the three objects that they have to win is there; if not, a mark will appear on the chosen hour.

The second game, called *El Tesoro* (The Treasure) is played against the computer by answering questions on the selected topic. Players must try to get a message that will tell them where the treasure is. Many treasures are found sailing far-off seas and exploring unknown lands, but there is one that can be found through culture. On screen learners see a map and a die; by pressing it and answering correctly chance will give them a letter of the message of this game but if their answer is wrong and they are not on a safe place (one of the palaces of the island), the computer will play against them and will take a letter away. Nevertheless, if the computer manages to snatch a letter from the player, s/he can get it back by pressing the button for *BONOS* or vouchers. To obtain a voucher players have to answer correctly three questions in a row.

The rules of the games and help are offered in English, French, German, and Portuguese; the default language is Spanish. According to our experience in the use of Internet and multimedia software in class, we suggest a playing time of 45 to 60 minutes per session what means that finishing the game in each session is not necessary as players may exit by pressing *SALIDA* (exit) or ESC; at that time they will obtain the number of questions asked and answered correctly.

5. Examples of questions

As an example, let's choose the block labeled festivities, traditions and sports. We read and/or hear a short conversation between two friends, one of which addresses the players by asking whether his singing rings them a bell: "*Allá en el rancho grande, / allá donde vivía, / había una rancherita...*" (laughs) which gives way to the second part with the question and the clue. The translation of the question is "Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete have sung RANCHERAS and CORRIDOS, typical songs and dancing of some Latin American countries. Quite often singers are accompanied by a group of typical musicians called CHARROS. The name of such a group of musicians is nearly MARÍA; that is to say: 1) Bolero 2) Mariachi 3) Tango. (Type in the number of the right answer)".

In this case the players have to write a number and deduce that the right answer is number two: MARIACHI. In this question, understanding the song of the first part is not necessary.

Let's take another example from the block called literature. We read and/or listen a short text that refers to the refined and learned language used during the Middle Ages: the Latin meanwhile the Castilian, language spoken by the inhabitants of towns and villages, was not considered a language of position although the Spanish writers of that time started to write in it.

The question and the clue are the following:

"Ambas tendencias, la culta y la popular, se unen en una de las obras maestras de la literatura universal. Fue escrita en el siglo XV por Fernando de Rojas, y se titula LA CELES_____ más las letras 6, 13, 8 y 1 de este párrafo. Escribe el título completo. (Dos palabras).

To deduce the whole title of the XV century masterpiece written by Fernando de Rojas in which the author mixed both languages, the refined Latin and the popular Castilian, the learner has to fill in the blank with letters 6, 13, 8 and 1 of the above paragraph written in Spanish; that is, letters T (6), I (13), N (8), and A (1) to infer that this masterpiece was entitled LA CELESTINA.

These are two examples of the different strategies we can use to help players infer the right answer, improve their language competence and broaden their culture. So reading/listening comprehension go hand in hand with as many different hints as we can imagine to allow players to reach their goal: to win, have fun and learn as the language and culture are not objectives but instruments towards the students' end.

6. Other possibilities

This multimedia software offers different facets that could expand the possibilities of the two games described above: the recording facility and the editor. The former allows learners to practice pronunciation by reading a text, reciting a poem or singing a song, for instance, within any of the seven

thematic blocks; the latter allows them to search for a word as, for example *guitarra*, or any other register and find information dealing with *flamenco*, *guitarra clásica*, *guitarristas*, *compositores*, etc. Information that could lead to other activities such as:

The re-elaboration in teams of questions using critical thinking

Answering questions posed by students

Exploring the net in order to extend the information obtained

In other words, to make use of this multimedia tool as a facility that teachers and learners can take advantage and that is complementary to any methodology, easy to use and fully tested in class with students of secondary school and university level.

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Authors

ANDREU-ANDRÉS, M^a Ángeles &
GARCÍA-CASAS, Miguel
Universidad Politécnica Valencia
ETSI en Geodesia, Cartografía y Topografía
Camino de Vera, s/n; 46022 Valencia, Spain
E-mail: maandreu@idm.upv.es