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CALLing all the CALLers Worldwide

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Gamifying teacher professional development through Minecraft MOOC

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Abstract

EVO Minecraft MOOC is an ongoing community of practice (CoP) of language teaching practitioners. The moderators of the MOOC invite newcomers with zero through any level of expertise in Minecraft to join us every January-February for training and exploration of the potential of Minecraft for community formation and language development. Many participants continue throughout the year developing their expertise, growing the community, and preparing for the next session under the guidance of a dedicated core of teaching peers, many of whom have been interacting with each other online in Minecraft for since 2015. This short paper explains how the group was formed, how it functions, and what we have learned about gamifying learning by experiencing gamification ourselves when playing the game Minecraft online with one another. More importantly we reflect continually on how what we learn through our experience collaborating with each other in-world informs our approach to teaching and learning. This paper shares our insights and perspectives on this process and invites readers to join us online if they wish to learn hands-on and first-hand what gamification is and feels like in the course of participation in an enjoyable and compelling online gamified learning environment.

Keywords: social networking, CALL innovation, gamification, MOOCs

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1. Introduction

Minecraft is a game that has caught and sustained the attention of teachers wanting to introduce gamification into their classrooms (Dikkers, 2015). However, teachers face two hurdles: the complexity and depth of the game itself, and understanding how students will interact and communicate with each other in Minecraft while engaging in self-directed critical and collaborative learning. EVO Minecraft MOOC was formed to resolve these problems.

Electronic Village Online (EVO) is an annual professional development event established in 2001 under the auspices of TESOL CALL-IS. It has taken place each January-February ever since (Hanson-Smith & Bauer-Ramazani, 2004). EVO comprises a baker's dozen of sessions proposed each year by language

teachers who develop their topics into training courses of interest to language teachers. Participation is free and open to anyone.

Since its formation as an EVO session in 2015, Minecraft MOOC has become an ongoing community of practice of language teaching practitioners gaining new members each year. This paper explains what teachers participating in EVO Minecraft MOOC learn about gamification through the experience of playing Minecraft, and what they learn about designing worlds within Minecraft that will meet their curriculum objectives and create an engaging and enjoyable task-based environment for learners.

2. EVO Minecraft MOOC formation and function

The author founded EVO Minecraft MOOC so that he himself could learn the game and develop the expertise to use it with students. The impetus was his collaboration with a Croatian colleague on an article in which she interviewed her 11-year old son on how he became fluent in English while engaging with other European players in Minecraft (Smolčec, Smolčec, & Stevens, 2014). Two teachers mentioned in the literature search for that article as using Minecraft in language learning, Jeff Kuhn and David Dodgson, joined us as co-moderators. Other teachers were attracted to the concept, including some who had considerable experience in the game and were able to help mentor the developing Minecraft literacy of others (Stevens, 2017).

Minecraft MOOC takes place primarily online in Minecraft. In order to attract new participants we renew our proposal each year to become an EVO session and invite people to join us at our Google+ Community (G+C). We also have a syllabus and a wiki at <http://missions4evomc.pbworks.com/> to suggest a structure for the course.

Successful participants find that by entering the game, learning happens in a process that Ito et al (2010) characterize as “hanging out, messing around, and geeking out.” Even participants without much knowledge of Minecraft, apart from a vague interest in using it with their students, through persistence eventually become remarkably creative and capable of guiding other teachers and students into adapting the game to their diverse learning goals.

3. Discussion

By experiencing Minecraft ourselves, we learn hands-on how gamification works and might apply to our own contexts. We see through meaningful play (Kuhn, 2015) how students interact and communicate with each other not only in Minecraft (using its native text chat and speaking through Discord voice app) but in its wider participatory culture (Kuhn & Stevens, 2017).

Through collaboration on projects such as elaborate constructions and organizing treks to temples and excavating them for their loot, we engage in self-directed, spontaneous learning. Our experiences show us how Minecraft brings critical thinking, collaboration, problem solving, and language and communication skills to bear on a range of concepts including architecture, engineering, chemistry, mathematics, coding, history, and the list goes on and on.

There are many instances of how Minecraft is used in English language learning, including the work of Jeff Kuhn who invoked zombies in Minecraft to generate ideas for ESL students writing about disaster management (cited in Smolčec, et al, 2014), and David Dodgson’s experiences with Minecraft in Turkey and elsewhere in EFL contexts (Dodgson, 2017; see also Uusi-Mäkelä, 2015).

We have found that Minecraft is capable of reversing the normal student-teacher dichotomy whereby teachers traditionally are assumed to know more than their students. We have seen that when teachers bring their children with them into the game, they often become more proficient than their parents, and mentor other adult players as well. Thus a productive strategy of using Minecraft with younger students would be

to set up a play space for them and empower them to become the experts, even to the extent of showing the teacher how to use Minecraft to help them master the curriculum.

We reflect continually on how what we learn through our experience collaborating with each other in-world informs our approach to teaching and learning. Our G+C has been an ideal space for sharing our screenshots and videos from in-world, and conversations around all our topics of interest ranging from helping newcomers to showing each other our builds and projects. Lately we have discussed there how to replace our G+C when Google drops support for the platform in April, 2019, discussing alternatives such as Google Classroom and Moodle, so that loss of G+C doesn't curtail our learning in the 2020 rendition of EVO Minecraft MOOC.

4. Conclusions

In our proposals, we invite teachers to join us who consider themselves to be teachers with a gaming problem, gamers with a teaching problem, or teachers of gamers with a learning problem. By this we mean to address teachers (1) who don't normally play games but would like to understand how gamification would work in their teaching contexts; (2) who already play games and would like to adapt what they know to teaching their students, and (3) who see that their students already play games like Minecraft, and want to know how they might leverage this into their curriculum.

When asked by sceptics if Minecraft is in the curriculum, the reply should be that the curriculum is somewhere in Minecraft. We encourage our peers to join us so that together we can figure out how and where Minecraft can be utilized in anyone's teaching context. We can be easily found through EVO, <http://evosessions.pbworks.com/>, or in a Google search on EVO Minecraft MOOC.

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Silence as a challenge:
How online language teachers deal with the void

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Abstract

Online language teachers are skilled in juggling numerous demands in terms of technical queries, L2 scaffolding needs and emotional or affective requirements of their learners. However, there are certain challenges that can interfere with a successful delivery of online language tutorials; prominent amongst them is the “wall of silence” or an unexpected breakdown in communication that makes teachers fear that they are talking into a void.

Although silences in face-to-face language classes have been researched to a certain extent over the past decades, online silences can have a different quality due to a lack of information available to the participants in online communication. Specifically in online language tutorials, a lack of feedback can have various reasons, from technical problems to a lack of L2 skills on the part of the learners, and a general reticence or shyness when speaking to virtual strangers.

This paper will provide an overview of different types of silences present in online environments and distinguish these in aspect and causes from silences in face-to-face classrooms. Data for this study comes from a range of sources, including classroom observation, eye-tracking experiments, and semi-structured and reflective interviews.

Keywords: Online language learning; teacher skills; online silence

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1. Introduction

The skills of online language teachers have been investigated and discussed in numerous studies (see e.g. Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Stickler & Hampel, 2015), showing that online tutorials demand different skills

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