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Hybrid Design and Flipping the Classroom in Content-Oriented Foreign Language Courses
Developing Intensive Italian for Gamers

Simone Bregni
Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, USA

Abstract Recently, content-based language teaching has emerged as a successful response to the increasing challenges that language departments in higher education face. This is a case study. The hybrid format enabled the creation of a content-based intensive foreign language video game-based course. Flipping the classroom allowed learners to spend more time and focus their attention on exploring the spoken language through the digital gaming realia and communication. It also encouraged independent language exploration. Pilot data show that students attained the desired level, autonomous learning continued, and less stress was involved.

Keywords Game-based learning. Computer assisted language learning. Computer assisted instruction. Gamification. Second language acquisition. Video game-based learning. Italian. Italian as a second language.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Narrative Video Games as Content and VGBL. – 3 A F/L2 Course for Gamers. – 4 Video Games as Digital *Realia*. – 5 Video Game-Based Learning and Critical Thinking. – 6 An 'Affinity Space' for Gamers. – 7 Responding to Programme Needs. – 8 The Advantages of a Flipped Format. – 9 Effective Use of Video Games as *Realia*. Task-Based Worksheets. – 10 Teaching with Games. Multimedia Classroom and Access to Gaming. – 11 Class Size, Location and Technology. – 12 The Advantages of VGBL Flipped-Classroom Content. Guided and Autonomous Exploration outside the Classroom. – 12.1 Outcomes Assessment. – 12.2 Course Evaluations Results, Student Reflections and Exit Surveys. – 12.3 Results. – 12.4 Teaching Intensive Italian for Gamers during the COVID-19 Pandemic. – 12.5 Li(p)mitations? Progress Is Being Made. – 12.6 Lack of Specific, Video Game-Based Foreign Language Learning Teaching Materials. – 13 Conclusions and Future Studies.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of content-based language teaching (CBLT)) as a potential successful response to the increasing challenges that foreign language departments in higher education currently face in the context of the economic downturns that have beset academia (see, for example, Lightbown 2013). The primary challenges are declining enrolments as well as programme closures. The 2016 Modern Language Association's (MLA) *Final Report on Enrolments in Languages Other than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education* shows a 9.2% decline in enrolments between fall 2013 and fall 2016. As the authors state,

> numbers imply that the downturn has affected introductory enrolments (the first through fourth semesters) most sharply, and indeed the 15.9% drop in enrolments at two-year institutions, a special area of concern given those institutions' role in higher education access, corroborates that interpretation. (Looney, Lusin 2019, 2)

The report calls for innovative critical thinking, in light of heightened focus on STEM degrees, then proceeds to present case studies of successful models. Those successful models all have one common element, the application of content-based learning. This article is a case study on the advantages of using a hybrid format in an intensive, content-based foreign language course, which utilises video game-based learning (VGBL). In this essay I also provide evidence that some current video games that have an emphasis on communication can be conducive to second and foreign language and culture (F/L2) acquisition. The successful experience of creating and teaching the course *Intensive Italian for Gamers* at Saint Louis University (SLU) ultimately reflects, and confirms, my belief that F/L2 acquisition necessarily means integration of language and content, thus rejecting the formal separation between 'content' and 'language' as a pedagogic necessity for language learning (Creese 2005). The 2016 MLA report highlights examples of

> programmes whose robust enrolments demonstrate the value of innovative curricular thinking as well as dedicated faculty members who have the support of their administration. (Looney, Lusin 2019, 2)

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The case studies that the authors then analyse on pages 7-21 of the report as examples of innovative curricular thinking all share one common element of content-based courses and curricula, although articulated in different forms. For example, integrating language and culture (page 7); community and cross-disciplinary connections (page 13); connecting languages and careers (i.e. Spanish and nursing, page 17).

2 Narrative Video Games as Content and VGBL

The rise in popularity of gaming on consoles, computers, mobile devices, and even 'casual gaming' on social networks, has contributed to making video games an integral facet of our lives. Since the early 1980s, video games have been a pervasive part of our culture. The Pew Research Center recently stated that about half of American adults play videogames, with no substantial differences between male and female players (Duggan 2015), while 97% of youth aged boys and 83% of youth-aged girls play video games (Anderson, Jiang 2018).

As a teacher of foreign languages, literature and culture, I have been experimenting with video game-based learning since 1998. In previous articles, I have discussed recent, communicative-oriented, cinematic video games, which I found to be effective in FL classroom as supplements to more traditional teaching techniques. I use VGBL as a tool to reinforce vocabulary and grammatical forms, as a means to present authentic cultural content (for example, the reconstruction of daily and political life in Renaissance Florence under the Medici in *Assassin's Creed II*) and as an opportunity for students to apply problem solving in the target language (TL). Games such as the main chapters in the *Assassin's Creed* series (*Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft, 2007-20) are fully interactive multimedia experiences combining real-time animation, speech, subtitles, writing (textual interaction) and, in some cases, even spoken interaction, in the form of audio, sometimes also video chat with other users. As a form of digital *realia*, artifacts in the TL that help enhance language acquisition, they can be used to reinforce and expand materials that have been previously learned through traditional methods (Bregni 2017; 2018; 2019).

3 A F/L2 Course for Gamers

Experimentation with introducing video games as a learning device in the F/L2 language classroom led me to explore the option of developing a video game-based language course. In fall 2016, as the recipient of a Saint Louis University (SLU) Reinert Center for Transformative Teach-

ing and Learning fellowship, I further developed language acquisition strategies, methodologies, and materials (worksheets, projects and assignments based on video games and related media, such as magazines, online and in print; websites; YouTube videos, etc.). In spring 2017, I used the SLU state-of-the-art Learning Studio to teach for the first time *Intensive Italian for Gamers*, a course that combines 'traditional' intensive language instruction with VGBL. Following the pedagogical premise that language acquisition is a process that involves, and benefits from, daily interactions in the language in and outside the classroom, the course targeted the specific segment of the student population that self-identifies as gamers, approximately 10% according to the 2015 Pew research (Duggan 2015). Based on my teaching practices and experiences, I believed that a strong, shared interest for gaming would stimulate and enhance the students' learning process, thus justifying the intensive nature of the course (Bregni 2017; 2018).

4 Video Games as Digital *Realia*

The potential of gaming in learning has been explored in a variety of fields, including language acquisition (e.g. Reinders 2012). Literature on video game in F/L2 acquisition mainly focuses on 'serious gaming', and is centred on the concept of player agency and the creation of specific games for F/L2 acquisition (Sykes, Reinhardt 2012; Neville 2009, 2010; Sørensen, Meyer 2007). In my research and teaching experience (Bregni 2017; 2018; 2019), certain commercial cinematic video games are fully interactive multimedia experiences that show positive results in terms of F/L2 (and, in some cases, culture) acquisition. Including such games in the curriculum as *realia* can help students improve their skills (Spurr 1942; Dlaska 2003). *Realia* afford F/L2 acquisition through development of specific personal interests. Cinematic games, like movies, include verbal and non-verbal communication, but also add the additional layer of agency, which improves learning (Deters et al. 2014). They also involve problem-solving (and, as we will see more in details below, critical thinking) that can be applied to group interaction, all particularly conducive to learning and F/L2 acquisition (Wenger 1998; Nunan 1992).

Additionally, video games as digital *realia* can contribute to the goal of transforming our students into life-long learners of (a) F/L2 language(s), a process explored by Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (e.g. Smith 1997).

Some specific commercial cinematic games contain materials diverse enough to aid in reinforcing many different parts of FL acquisition (lexicon, grammar, morphology and syntax). However, in order for all *realia* to be effective, video games included, there must be solid preliminary work done, which involves the creation of vocabu-

lary worksheets, listening, reading comprehension and grammar exercises that should take place both before and after each video game-based class activity (Bregni 2017; 2018; 2019).

5 Video Game-Based Learning and Critical Thinking

Is using video games in the foreign language classroom an instance of gamification? It is necessary to define and delineate a distinction between gamification and Game-Based Learning (GBL), two concepts that are often confused. Gamification (teachers turning lessons into a game they designed) is merely a revamped reward system, not an actual teaching method. It is a motivational tool. Motivation is important to encourage learning, but it does not actually do the teaching. GBL refers to the borrowing of certain gaming principles and applying them to real-life settings to engage users (Trybus 2010). GBL is pedagogy, closely connected to play theory. In GBL, learners apply critical thinking (Farber 2017). Regarding critical thinking, research highlights the importance of student discourse in the construction of knowledge and the fostering of critical thinking skills, especially in the field of problem-based learning (PBL). Further, a growing body of research on GBL draws parallels between playing specific types of games (analogue or digital quests centred on problem-solving, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or the *Assassin's Creed* series), and the solving of ill-structured problems, citing similar conditions for learning (teachers as facilitators, small student groups, student centred, problems as vehicles for development), and similar learning outcomes (collaboration, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking) as PBL. Cicchino (2015) demonstrates how GBL affects critical thinking as evidenced by student discourse in traditional classroom environments. Since my focus is video games, I refer to my research and teaching practices as video game-based learning, or VGBL.

6 An 'Affinity Space' for Gamers

By designing a course specifically targeting self-professed gamers, I aimed to create an 'affinity space'. According to Gee,

> [a]n affinity space is a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender. (Gee 2004, 77)

As research indicates, affinity learning groups, whether formal or informal, enhance learning (Gee 2005). Such affinity spaces can also take place virtually, in online video games or online spaces for

gamers (fora, groups, etc. Hayes, Gee 2010). In creating the course, therefore, my purpose was to set up a learning environment specifically designed to attract self-professed gamers, which uses highly-communicative, cinematic video games as *realia* to reinforce, and expand on, vocabulary, grammar, morphology and syntax already acquired through traditional methods. Based on my preliminary research during course development, I believed that creating an 'affinity group' of gamers would allow students to progress rapidly in the language, thus acquiring the equivalent of two semesters of elementary language in one. I also believed, based on research, personal experience and previous in-class experimentations, that students would attain very positive results. Finally, since gamers like to be challenged, I believed that the course would provide students with language acquisition instruments that would enable them to continue progressing in the foreign language by playing video games (and therefore learning) outside the classroom, and beyond the course.

7 Responding to Programme Needs

The course was created to respond to a specific need, declining enrolments in third semester Italian. Currently, the university has a three-semester Core language requirement for most students in the College of Arts and Sciences, which is the largest at the university. Students are expected to acquire competency at the novice-mid proficiency level according to the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale. The hybrid format allowed me to create a content course that would enable students to take the equivalent of the first two semesters of language and culture instruction in one. Since 2013, and before the creation of *Intensive Italian for Gamers*, third semester Italian (which is offered on a rotation system every fall semester only), struggled to attract the necessary number of students (ten minimum) to avoid course cancellation, thus potentially endangering the well-being of the programme, since students declare a major and minor in Italian Studies during their third semester. Since the hybrid course was offered for the first time in spring 2017, third semester Italian has been in good standing.

8 The Advantages of a Flipped Format

I believed that a college-level foreign language course could be centred on video game-based acquisition and provide positive results. Given the nature of the content and of the medium, it became evident at a very early stage of the process of course creation that the only viable format could be a flipped one.

As I mentioned, *realia*, including video games, cannot be used by themselves, but they can be effectively used to reinforce materials that have been learned through traditional methods. Games such as Quantic Dream's *Detroit: Becoming Human*, present animated, spoken cinematic scenes and in-game text and subtitles in multiple languages, including Italian. Each main chapter in the *Assassin's Creed* series, with its detailed re-creation of everyday life and culture within a specific era and geographical setting, allows educators and students in languages and cultures to virtually explore, first-hand, everyday life in societies that are distant both in space and time. Two chapters of the *Assassin's Creed* series are set in Renaissance Italy: in Florence under the Medici, then Savonarola; in Rome under Alexander VI; and in Venice under the Most Serene Republic. While the authors took some liberties with the historical content, the cultural re-creation is accurate: cities, clothing, habits have been reconstructed from contemporary iconography and documents by a multidisciplinary team of experts. In *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017), set in Hellenistic Egypt, the creators have reconstructed the pronunciation of *koiné* Greek, the *lingua franca* that was spoken in the area at the time.

For GBL, like any other *realia*, to be effective, however, there must be solid preliminary work done involving the creation of vocabulary worksheets, listening and reading comprehension exercises and follow-up activities that should happen before each video game-based class activity (Bregni 2017; 2018). Each gaming session was combined with preliminary and follow-up worksheets centred on scaffolding (Sawyer 2006) and task-based learning (Thomas, Reinders 2010). It is a process I call *Identify*, *Acquire*, *Create* (IAC) that informs my methodology, including worksheets, which use cinematic video games as *realia*, as will be described in detail below. They are designed to reinforce what students already know (previous vocabulary and cognates, for example), and then expand their knowledge by gradually introducing new vocabulary and structures. The game's cinematic cut-scene sections are used for fill-in-the-gaps and word-matching exercises, which guide students to identify new vocabulary and structures in context. Other exercises guide students to answer questions (individually, in pairs or small groups) and role-play to acquire new vocabulary, verbs and idioms. The final phase includes follow-up exercises focused on expansion of oral and written production (Bregni 2017; 2019).

The process of using *realia* in the F/L2 classroom is time-consuming, particularly in the case of an immersive course involving interactive medium such as narrative video games. My *Intensive Italian for Gamers* could not have been possible without a hybrid course format. In this course, as well as in our other elementary and lower intermediate language courses at SLU, we used *Percorsi* by Pearson (Italiano, Marchegiani 2015). Starting in 2021, we intend to use Vista Higher

Learning's *Sentieri* (Cozzarelli 2020). Both are connected to online Learning Management Systems (LMS).[1] Both online programmes are user-friendly and are designed to train and test students in all areas of language acquisition (listening, speaking, reading, writing), and integrate culture(s) well. Adopting textbooks with integrated LMS has allowed me to 'flip' the classroom. We meet students on our courses three times a week, for 50-minute periods and for one 50-minute lab once a week. The hybrid format allows for consolidation of grammar and vocabulary to be done as homework assignments. Typically, I first provide a very brief (five minute) overview of a new vocabulary section or grammatical point (i.e. parts of the house or second conjugation verbs). I then assign vocabulary and grammar sections, which students learn at home on the LSM. Then, when we meet in class, thirty minutes are for 'regular' instruction: modelling, exercises from the textbook, solving doubts, further expansion of vocabulary and structures. The last twenty minutes of each class period are then devoted to game-based learning. Prior to each class I select a section of a game that specifically allows me to reinforce the structures and vocabulary that students have just learned through their textbook and LMS and modelled in class.

The key to the gaming component of the course is playing games in the chosen language with subtitles set in that same language. The biggest challenge for language learners at the total beginner and lower intermediate levels (which, according to proficiency standards of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, ACTFL.org, typically correspond to the first two to three years of FL instruction in high-school, or the first three semesters in college), is to move away from constantly translating everything into one's own native language, and towards approaching the foreign language as such, with its own forms and structures. Whenever students encounter a word that is not familiar, they are invited to look at the context. Are they able to give that word a plausible meaning based on that specific context? If so, they are encouraged to do exactly that, and move on. If students are completely stuck on that word, they are encouraged to pause the game, and take a few seconds to look up that word in a dictionary. Students soon notice that their vocabulary is rapidly expanding, that those new, previously unfamiliar words are quickly becoming part of their vocabulary.

1 See `https://mlm.pearson.com/northamerica/mylanguagelabs/` and `https://www.vhlcentral.com/`.

9 Effective Use of Video Games as *Realia*. Task-Based Worksheets

As mentioned above, each gaming session is combined with preliminary and follow-up worksheets centred on scaffolding and task-based learning. My typical worksheet first presents general gaming vocabulary and a brief overview of the game in the TL, focusing on cognates, words that are similar among languages that share common roots. Pictures are used to introduce new vocabulary as presented in the game. The video cut-scene sections are used for fill-in-the-gaps and word-matching exercises, to guide students to identify new words, verbs and idioms in context (first phase, *Identify*). Additional exercises assist students' listening comprehension (with YouTube links to users' play-through videos that students can use for follow-up exercises). Through hyperlinks, students can learn more about the context (for instance, Renaissance Italy). The game can be paused at any time, and students can engage in answering question, group repetition and role-play exercises in pairs or in group. All these exercises are designed to help students acquire new vocabulary, verbs and idioms (second phase, *Acquire*). The final phase (*Create*) includes follow-up exercises focused on expansion of written and oral production, partially done in class and partially assigned as homework. For example, after learning about the parts of the house (the kitchen and its appliances, the bedroom and its furniture, etc.), the class plays the first fifteen minutes from the first chapter of *Detroit: Become Human*, which I selected because it presents many of those verbs in context. That section deals with house chores. As we learn, the young protagonist, Kara, who looks human, is in reality an android. In terms of vocabulary expansion, this section is effective in that it presents in context vocabulary related to chores, furniture, appliances and parts of the house. A worksheet I created guides students to review related vocabulary and structures, and then observe them at play in the game's narrative (through fill-in-the-gaps exercises). Other exercises assist students in expanding their vocabulary (using images to introduce unfamiliar words) and forms (i.e., talking about chores). Finally, students are asked to discuss, reflect upon and write about the storyline first, and then about their own life experiences, by applying the vocabulary, verbs and structures that they have just learned. This is the process I call *Identify*, *Acquire*, *Create* (IAC): identifying, first, already known vocabulary and structures, then new ones; acquiring them through a series of task-based exercises; finally, creating written texts and spoken discourse. Current high-budget, cinematic games feature detailed narratives that often lend themselves to animated discussions regarding the complex social issues contained therein. This is certainly the case in *Detroit: Become Human*. In the sequence I utilise, Kara meets 9-year-old Al-

ice, the child whose life Kara will ultimately save. Alice's father is a drug dealer, an addict himself, and abusive. Kara, breaking the barrier of her programming constraints and thus developing autonomous consciousness, decides to step in and rescue the child from her father's blind rage. It is a powerful narrative that has captured the attention of gamers worldwide. Lead writer Adam Williams, in an interview, discussed how the game is not about specific social issues, but rather a universal theme of a divided society (Lemne 2018). In fact, my students have discussed how the game's narrative focuses on a variety of issues that divide society, including sexism, racism, homophobia, social inequality, domestic violence, substance abuse, etc., a perspective confirmed by Waszkiewicz (2018), for whom Kara's post-humanism (in that she is an android who develops free will) aims to challenge the player's vision of the world. As Williams stated,

> We wanted to explore the universal theme of a divided society and let the player bring their own specific context to the story, which is going to help them write their own story to the choices they make. (Cited in Lemne 2018)

While the subject matter does not make the game suitable for use in the high-school classroom, given the appropriate framing, trigger-warnings and disclaimers, I found that it can facilitate discussions in more advanced courses. I suggest that it could possibly be used within the context of a multi-disciplinary project, for example in psychology, artificial intelligence or social work.

Game-based activities are not only limited to gaming, but also include analysis of related digital *realia*, such as YouTube videos and online gaming magazines. As I mentioned, the course has a connected weekly lab hour. During lab meetings, students conduct online-based, individual and small-group activities through related *realia* (such as videos, for example, creating a video review of a game; online gaming magazines, and game-creator apps) and that further expands upon what has been recently learned. Accordingly, I developed weekly class gaming worksheets and separate set of bi-weekly lab activity worksheets. Worksheets follow the content of vocabulary and grammar as it is presented in *Percorsi* and *MyItalianLab*. I use scaffolding and task-based learning to organise the exercises included in my worksheets.

I prepare for each game-based activity by exploring gaming content. I play the games myself and use some of the playthrough videos uploaded by gamers on YouTube, which are available in multiple languages.

10 Teaching with Games. Multimedia Classroom and Access to Gaming

The Sony PlayStation (PS) 4 currently has the highest number of cinematic games. Many of them are system exclusive, such as the Quantic Dream games, which are also the most effective, in my view, for FL acquisition, since they have a focus on narratives and dialogues, rather than action). Some games are also effective for foreign culture acquisition, besides language (for example, the two chapters from the *Assassin's Creed* series that are set in Renaissance Italy). The multimedia Learning Studio classroom where *Intensive Italian for Gamers* is taught is equipped with a PS4 console. The system is small enough that it is easily portable so sometimes I bring my own, for example, to the Language Lab (where the class meets once a week). In the lab, we do other related activities in which students actively use the PCs that are available to them, for example, to create a language game quiz on Kahoot, or to create a video game video review.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the limitations inherent to a course based on access to technology and the Internet that are more accessible in most universities. The necessity of moving instruction online has exposed the inequities of access and called for creative solutions that would still make a VGBL course meaningful and, above all, accessible for all students. The solutions I explored are illustrated later in this article.

11 Class Size, Location and Technology

As mentioned, in spring 2017, 2019 and the first part of 2020, the course was taught in the SLU Reinert Center state-of-the-art Learning Studio. Foreign language courses at SLU are typically capped at twenty students. However, due to the interactive nature of the Learning Studio space, courses that take place there are capped at fifteen.

The studio is equipped with a large wall screen monitor that can be subdivided into multiple screens, each potentially showing an independent video source. Typically, I would divide the screen (vertically) into two main areas, one displaying the classroom PC screen (for the *Percorsi* eBook, PowerPoints and worksheets) and the other one for the PS4.

Students also had access to tablets and laptops, besides their own mobile devices. We used PS4 because, as I mentioned, some of the best communicative gaming experiences are available only on that system, such as Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond: Two Souls* and

Detroit: Become Human,[2] three complex cinematic experiences (Bregni 2017; 2018; 2019). Also, gaming PCs tend to be very expensive. Thanks to the support of the Reinert Center and my departments, students have access to a PS4 system and games entirely 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 has been reserved to function as a gaming lab, which students in the department can freely access every day for several hours a day. The cinematic games I recommended for purchase also include content in Spanish, French and German, while some also offer Chinese, Portuguese and Russian. Students from all languages taught in the department are able to access gaming in the Language Learning Center from 8 a.m. through 8 p.m. weekdays.

In terms of the actual in-classroom gameplay, I elicit volunteers. One student would physically hold the gamepad, while the rest of the class 'guides' him/her through a series of commands in the TL ("Jump!", "Turn right!", "Open that door!" and so on) and by expressing approval or disappointment, using communicative forms and structures they have learned on a preliminary worksheet. Each volunteer gamer would hold the pad for approximately five minutes, and then pass the pad to another student.

As I mentioned, we only cover a specific portion of the game in class: approximately 15-20 minutes, which allows me to reinforce specific structures and vocabulary as needed. In some cases, games allow me also to teach cultural elements, besides F/L2, in new, immersive ways. So, for example, I have been using the first thirty minutes or so of gameplay of *Assassin's Creed II* to reinforce imperative forms; some conversational and idiomatic expressions; to learn about the Medici family in Renaissance Florence; to learn about the monumental landmark bridge Ponte Vecchio, its architecture and history, and, more in general, about Roman infrastructure such as sewers and aqueducts that the Medici renovated; and the background of the contemporary feud between the Medici and the Pazzi family. The main chapters in the *Assassin's Creed* series can also be used to teach, for example, about the foundation of the United States (*Assassin's Creed III*); the French Revolution (*Unity*); the Colonial era (*Black Flag*); Classical Greece (*Odyssey*); and more.

2 https://www.quanticdream.com/.

12 The Advantages of VGBL Flipped-Classroom Content. Guided and Autonomous Exploration outside the Classroom

The cinematic games I select are polished, attractive, big budget products. Their characters, storylines and narrative development are designed to attract gamers. That is certainly the case for my students, who have expressed enthusiasm for the games used. My activities focus on the first forty minutes or so of gameplay (the average cinematic game is designed to last between approximately six and twenty hours of gameplay total). I aim to provide students with the tools that ultimately enable them to play the entire game on their own. Even after only four weeks of classes, students were able to navigate the plot, the characters and their motivations, and knew enough context to be able to acquire new elements that enabled them to proceed with the storyline. Thus, I encouraged them to continue playing on their own (as a group, outside the classroom, by accessing the PS4 and games available for them in the Language Resource Center). When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I developed solutions that, as we will see later on, enabled them to continue playing at home. The in-class gaming sections, which were typically conducted, and concluded, over the span of one week (one per learning unit), provide students with the necessary linguistic background (vocabulary and structures within that specific narrative context) that enables them to continue playing the game on their own. I would however always encourage students to play as a group in the game-based sessions at the Center. As research has shown, group interaction centred on problem solving is highly conducive to learning and language acquisition in particular (Wenger 1998; Nunan 1992). Positive preliminary results from outcomes assessment seem to point in that direction (see section below).

Students are also encouraged to set their own gaming systems and games at home in the TL, which would allow them to play games in that language. This works on all recent gaming systems. I also always recommend setting in-game menus and turning on subtitles in the TL. A good exercise I propose is to re-play games they have already completed, but this time in the TL (for game menus, dialogues and subtitles). Games purchased in Western Europe are compatible with the current generation of US consoles. While games sold in the Americas only typically include three languages (English, Latin-American Spanish, French Canadian), Western European games include full content in English (UK), Italian, French (France), Spanish (Spain), German, and often also Dutch and Portuguese.

12.1 Outcomes Assessment

Outcomes assessment was performed, using both direct (testing: initial test, midterm exam, and final exam) and indirect measures (an exit survey and an intercultural competency survey). The midterm and final exams are comprehensive, as they include all materials covered in class up to that point. The format, vocabulary and grammar exercises are the same as other 'traditional' language courses. Reading and listening comprehension, as well as written production exercises, are similar in structure. The only difference is the context, in that exercises focus specifically on gaming. For example, in the final exam students listen to, and read, video game reviews, and then answer related questions; in the written production section, students are asked to write their own video game review. The exit survey asks questions about students' perception of their learning, as well as their level of appreciation for the FL. Their results were compared to students in regular, non-hybrid, non-game-based courses. Preliminary analysis does show some interesting facts that are worthy of further study (see results below).

12.2 Course Evaluations Results, Student Reflections and Exit Surveys

The response rate in the course evaluations was 66.67%. Questions in the course evaluations are standardised across the College of Arts and Sciences at SLU. Here are some of the responses that I selected as most appropriate for the nature of this study:

- 100% of the respondents strongly agreed that the course design (timing of and relationships among readings, discussions, labs, assignments, exams, etc.) supported their achievement of the course learning outcomes.
- 100% of the respondents agreed (50% strongly agreed) that the course challenged them intellectually.
- 100% of the respondents strongly agreed that the course required them to apply what they learned in new ways.

The overall course median score was 3.85/4.00 (the department median score was 3.62 and the College median score was 3.55). The overall instructor median score was 4/4 (the department median score was 3.79 and the College median score was 3.66). Students commented that learning in the course was fun and approachable. They also liked that the instructor adapted test and quizzes to reflect the course focus on gaming, as well as the related cultural content that gaming introduced. They also commented on feeling at ease (they repeatedly used the word "safe" to describe their experience as stress-

free) in expressing themselves in the TL in the classroom, especially when talking about their gaming passion, likes and dislikes. This was my aim in creating an 'affinity group'. The strong, shared passion for gaming gave the group a connection, a sense of belonging, and created a learning community. Even students who are typically introverted, or had negative experiences in high-school language courses (who reported feeling like they were "put on the spot" every time the teacher asked them to respond in the TL) felt inclined to participate, were not afraid of making mistakes and were responsive to modelling of correct pronunciation, vocabulary and structures. Games helped to lower or eliminate the 'affective filter' in the world language classroom.

After taking *Intensive Italian for Gamers*, 16.6% of the students in the course graduated; 16.6% transferred; and 33.3% of the students continued taking courses in the TL. In an online survey conducted approximately six months after completing the course, students were asked to provide general comments on their learning in the course, as well as on motivation to continue learning in their TL after course completion. Did they continue playing games in the TL ("always", "often", "sometimes", "rarely" or "never")? The response rate was 83.3%. Most interestingly, all of the respondents reported that they autonomously continued to play games in their TL, in their own spare time, with a higher tendency towards "often".

Students' narrative comments, also, were quite interesting. For example, one student, who could not continue taking Italian due to scheduling conflicts, wrote:

> Even though I have been busy with my classes, I have been playing *Pokémon Black* in Italian in my spare time. I have been switching all the games I own to Italian whenever possible (*Borderlands 2*, *Skyrim*, *Halo Reach*), but since the *Pokémon* games are very dialogue-heavy I've preferred Italian *Pokémon*. [...] I guess I would put myself down as "often" [..]. It feels weird playing games in English now. Recently I have been able to fit in studying Italian again on *Duolingo*. They changed the format of the website so there are multiple layers of repetition now, so I am having an easier time learning/remembering everything as opposed to previous months/years I've spent on the site. I have also been turning on Italian subtitles on YouTube videos whenever possible. [...] I really hope in the coming years I am able to reach fluency. It is such a beautiful language and it fills me with joy just pronouncing the words.

The student continued to work independently on FL acquisition even after completing the course, and while not taking further courses. She was already familiar with the games she mentions (as many of our students are, since they are popular, long-standing franchis-

es), and also felt motivated to pursue independent learning in other forms that were available to her (Duolingo). Last but not least, she mentions passion for the language and reward (she uses the word "joy") in its acquisition.

Another student wrote:

> I would always play games in Italian except for games with no story/voice acting. Now it's closer to very occasionally when I want to play the one game with Italian subtitle. That change I feel came from the fact that I don't have anyone local to talk to in Italian. While practising my Italian I would alternate playing games with Italian subtitles/English voice acting with games with English subtitles/Italian voice acting. I did not get to the point of Italian subtitles/Italian voice acting, but that could have been my next step. I found this method far more fun than when I was learning Spanish in high school. I was convinced after going through Spanish that my brain was just not built for language. After taking your class, as well as the anthropology project I did on learning Italian, I think I was just using that as an excuse not to make an effort. I have retained more Italian partly due to being immersed in the language for hours rather than struggling to stare at a book for an hour.

In this case, the student compares the experience of learning Italian through gaming with his/her experience of learning another romance language, Spanish, in high school with a traditional method. Motivation becomes the highlight of this comment, in my view: gaming motivated the student to make more of an effort, as a result of the experience of learning in an environment where s/he was not made to feel like his/her "brain was just not built for language". Games therefore facilitated a sense of accessibility. Learning became a challenge that was attainable through continuous application and effort.

A student responded in Italian, and wrote (translation is mine):

> I play every game that I can find that has an Italian version available. Now I am playing *Oxenfree* on Nintendo Switch. Thank you so much for such a unique experience!

While the student also expresses motivation to continue playing in the TL past the course completion, s/he makes another interesting point: gratitude for a transformative ("unique" is the word s/he uses) experience.

Another student wrote, also in Italian (translation is mine):

> I continue playing video games in Italian as my chosen language, and I am learning new words, idioms and phrases through this method.

This comment points in the direction of continued expansion of grammar and structures past the course completion.

12.3 Results

Results indicate that the experience has been very positive. Although students came from very different backgrounds in terms of linguistic abilities, they all successfully attained second-semester competency in the language. By the third week of the semester students could effectively provide gaming-related commands ("Go forward!", "Open the door!", "Take the path to the right!", "Talk to the person in the room!") and express success or disappointment, all essential communicative structures that are normally acquired towards the end of the first or early second semester.

Most interestingly, all students autonomously continued to explore gaming in the TL outside the classroom, by playing their own games in the language, or meeting as a group to play in our language lab. As a result, by the end of the semester students were showing knowledge of the language and culture (including idioms, interjections and fillers, expressions of joy, excitement and frustration, all markers of proficiency and fluency in foreign language acquisition) above standard. While more long-term research must be done, initial results of this course do, in fact, provide an answer to the question of whether video games as *realia* are effective in language acquisition. They also provide an answer to the question of whether the flipped format is beneficial to F/L2 acquisition, since the delivery of the VGBL content would not have been feasible without utilising a flipped course format. Currently, the size of the sample is small, since the course has only been formally taught three times to groups of ten to fifteen students. This makes it difficult to run significance tests on the data. However, preliminary analysis does show some interesting facts that are worthy of further study. In the language course for gamers, the mid-term grade approximates the final grade that students would achieve in the first semester of the two-semester sequence and the final grade approximates the final grade that students would achieve in the second semester of the two-semester sequence. A look at this data shows that students in the gaming course were almost four points lower when comparing the midterm grade with the final first semester student grades. When one looks at the final grade for the gamers, as compared to second semester students, the relationship reverses. Here the students in this new course rank two points higher than their counterparts in the regular programme. What this seems to indicate is that the 'initial shock' of the intensity of the course might well have a dampening effect on grades but by the end of the semester, the students are doing better than their counterparts in regu-

lar courses. The intensity and immersion may be confusing initially but can be overcome, yielding better results for students. When the course was offered again in spring 2019, it produced similar results.

12.4 Teaching *Intensive Italian for Gamers* during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Interestingly enough, the course also produced very similar results in spring 2020, when, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, all courses at Saint Louis University were moved online when classes resumed after spring break. I then decided to teach my course in a more complex hybrid format, in a synchronous and asynchronous pattern. We met on the same days and at the same time as the regular course on Zoom, the video conference online platform, for social interaction and development of speaking skills. We then used a combination of the textbook LMS (*MyItalianLab*) and BlackBoard, the official LMS at my institution. Gaming sessions were conducted asynchronously. Not all students owned a gaming system, and even fewer of them had access to those specific games in Italian. Thus, for the content-specific weekly game-based activities that I had prepared, we used playthrough videos on YouTube. In light of that substantial change, I asked students to select one game among those which, early in the pandemic, were made available for free on PC and Mac (Ubisoft and EpicGames, as well as other companies, made some of their best games available for free); or to select one of the games already in their possession that included full Italian content. I also asked students to write a weekly journal entry in the BlackBoard discussion group about their gaming sessions, with the following instructions: play for approximately twenty minutes each week; identify at least three idioms, or sentences, or structures that they already knew, identify and describe at least three new idioms, or sentences, or structures and, finally, write a comment on the overall experience.

The pandemic has pushed me to explore new solutions for new problems. One problem that the pandemic made evident was the need for equality in access to technology. Should the COVID-19 emergency extend well into 2021, I have identified a possible, more accessible solution. All students already have access to a laptop. A subscription to the Ubisoft's *UPlay+* online platform would enable students to access 100+ games, many of which cinematic and with full multilanguage content, for a monthly subscription fee of approximately 15 dollars. At issue, a decision needs to be determined on how the university can facilitate the acquisition of educational materials for all students during social distancing. Based on the experience of the first three months of the pandemic, it is also feasible to assume that publishers will continue offering games for free in the future.

12.5 Li(p)mitations? Progress Is Being Made

In a previous article (Bregni 2017) I mentioned that at least one game development company recognises the potential and importance of fine-tuning the linguistic dimensions of their games: Ubisoft. At the time, they were exploring AI language-specific automated lip-syncing in their forthcoming products (Boyle 2018). That is currently the case, since late 2018, with games such as *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. Observation of lip movements has been shown to assist in listening comprehension (Kellerman 1990; Gullberg 2006). This was an important limitation that is currently being addressed by video game producers. Other companies, in fact, have taken notice. Personal communication with Ubisoft developers has confirmed that this was a very intentional step forward that their company has taken, based on focus groups with educators. It is feasible to assume that more games are also being used as foreign language learning devices, because the video game market has exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic (Smith 2020). Also, more media around the world are covering the language learning advantages afforded by video games. However, another important limitation that is still present at the moment, and the most relevant one, is that not all games are fully localised to the extent I they should be. Full localisation (which is not just mere translation, but a full cultural adaptation in which all elements are perfectly understandable for any player from the country in question) is an investment that I believe all companies should make. Maybe governments should consider getting involved, by financing and promoting localisation as a means to promote the learning of the language(s) and culture(s) of their country.

12.6 Lack of Specific, Video Game-Based Foreign Language Learning Teaching Materials

There are currently no textbooks that could provide a 'data bank' of suitable commercial games and video game-based exercises for F/L2 acquisition (Bregni 2017; 2019). Dr. Brandon Essary at Elon University and I have revised and collected the materials we have developed for our VGBL courses using commercially available games. Our proposal is currently in circulation among US and European publishers. Our format could be adapted to all languages, not just Italian, which is what Dr. Essary and I teach. Creation of additional VGBL courses at other institutions that could be facilitated by the adoption of a common, specific textbook, would allow for extensive data collection above and beyond the current limited sample.

13 Conclusions and Future Studies

The experience of teaching *Intensive Italian for Gamers* in its three iterations so far (2017, 2019 and 2020) was very positive. Although students came from very different backgrounds in terms of linguistic abilities, outcomes assessment showed that they all successfully attained second-semester competency (the ACTFL Novice-mid Proficiency level) in the language.

VGBL activities immersed students in the TL, through a medium they love, and which has currently become a regular part of life experience. As a result, by the third week of the semester all students in the course could effectively use essential communicative structures that are normally acquired towards the end of the first, or early second semester.

The 'affinity space' of, and for, gamers continues producing positive results. Students regularly comment on feeling like they can express themselves in the TL in the *Intensive Italian for Gamers* (both physical and virtual) classroom without fear of making mistakes. Games helped to lower or eliminate the 'affective filter' in the F/L2 classroom.

Students continued playing games in the language outside the classroom. As a result, by the end of the semester students were showing knowledge of the language and culture well above standards. In the final test, students in the course continued to rank two points higher than their counterparts in the regular programme.

Furthermore, interviewed students mentioned that they continued to play games that used Italian even after the course had finished. Their motivation continued beyond the end of the course. A substantial portion of my students (approximately 25%) are Computer Science majors. My institution does not yet offer a game studies curriculum. Is it feasible to argue that my students may one day pursue a career in the gaming industry where their Italian linguistic and cultural competency skills will play a relevant role? I believe that may well prove to be the case.

In conclusion, I would like to share some additional observations as an educator during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. I observed that gamers were the most resilient group among my students. A common comment during our Zoom sessions was that the scenario we were experiencing amidst the pandemic was considerably less threatening compared to what they had all experienced virtually through game series such as *Bioshock*, *Final Fantasy*, *Assassin's Creed* or *Fallout*. Also, gamers, being more used to spending time indoors immersed in their hobby, appeared to be less affected by social distancing. Even during the pandemic, my VGBL students fared well in their course, attaining results that were comparable to those in the two previous iterations of the course.

Thus, while additional long-term research must be done, results of this course do, in fact, provide an answer to the question of whether the use of video game *realia* improves language acquisition. Results from 2019 and 2020 reinforced my belief that video games are an effective didactic tool for F/L2 acquisition, thanks to the immersive nature of the medium (Bregni 2019).

My content course, which would not have been possible without a hybrid format, could serve as a model that could be applied to other languages and even other fields. The *Assassin's Creed* series, in particular, continues to lend itself to interesting multidisciplinary developments. For example, with my colleague in Classics we are currently co-developing an Introduction to the Classical Humanities course that utilises the chapters *Origins* and *Odyssey* for VGBL activities. Such course design could also be applied to other fields of study (i.e. History, Art, Literature, Creative Writing, and many more).

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