CAMELOT - Using and Creating Machinima for Language Teaching

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The EU-funded CAMELOT Project [1] aims to promote the role of video production in language teacher training by using machinima to empower language learning through the use of user-generated content. Machinima is a neologism deriving from the words 'machine' and 'cinema' and refers to the use of real-time 3D computer graphics to create and record cinematic productions. Research suggests that there are a number of reasons for using video in language teaching. Videos are motivating for learners and provide authentic situations and language and are fun to watch. With the advent of social media an increasing amount of video resources can be found on YouTube and similar video sharing channels or as part of an online language training program. Comparing Sherman's (2003) [2] and LinguaTV's (2014) [3] publications on the use of video in the language classroom, with the use of machinima as described by Rainbow and Schneider (2014) [4], there does not seem to be any difference in the activities used for videos or machinima in the classroom. Both video and machinima can:

- provide authentic language;
- offer opportunities for discussion and reflection;
- stimulate further activities (i.e. role play, writing dialogues etc.);
- provide a wide range of genres (e.g., information, instruction, idioms, grammar, sketches, story- telling);
- serve as a model for spoken language;
- can be used in a real life classroom as well as in a virtual learning environment.

This paper identifies how machinima could be used in the language classroom. Moreover, it discusses findings from research in order to illustrate the potential of creating machinima in Second Life, focusing in particular on how it can be as a tool for feedback.

1. Introduction

Research suggests that there may be significant benefits of using professionally created high quality video materials in the language classroom (Stephen Abram, 2012 [5]). Nevertheless, using commercially available video may be limiting in that instructors and learners have little control over the content or how it can be used in classroom environments. Machinima (or digital videos created in a 3D immersive environment such as a virtual world or digital game) is a fairly recent phenomenon, but one of its potential advantages over commercial video is that resources can be designed for specific purposes. This cost-effective mode of video production can be driven by learners and instructors and be very useful when facilitating less commonly taught languages or when looking for an ad hoc illustration of a grammar point, a particular set of instructions or a specific situation (Rainbow & Schneider 2014). The ability to create digital video quickly, cheaply and easily is a useful skill for both teachers and learners and machinima production has the potential to be a powerful approach for developing learner agency, L2 identity and ownership in the language learning process (Norton & Toohey, 2011) [6].

In the age of social media it is often easier to demonstrate something via machinima than to explain it with words. In a recent interview Falconer (2014) highlighted the importance of using visuals in learning by stating that "A picture is worth a thousand words, a video is worth a million words" [7]. Making machinima can be a very powerful way to visualise learner experiences. In other words, when making machinima instructors can portray a wide range of experience and use it as a stimulus for feedback on the process of creation. In addition to this, creating and filming their own scenarios encourages learners to fully engage in the learning process and take ownership of their product. By collaborating and interacting with other learners students practice language as well as interpersonal skills. Machinima can be very powerful in providing learners with an opportunity to keep evidence of their activities or productions. They can report about a place they visited in virtual worlds, give a presentation, use pictures or video clips taken during their visit and describe places or events. They

can set up an exhibition in virtual worlds and film the event. Learners and facilitators can analyse a recorded session, which provides an excellent source for reflection, error correction and language revision.

2. Using machinima/video in the classroom

Using video or machinima to enhance language learning has become very popular in recent years, whether they are used in the physical classroom, in an online or 3D learning environment, a blended course or in a flipped classroom (NTTI,thirteen-ed-online) [8]. According to Moviestorm Ltd (2011) [9]. "Video is now the preferred medium of communication for young people. The YouTube Generation relates better to video than to text or spoken presentation, and studies suggest that many of them retain information better when presented as video." This argument is supported by Myers (2014) [10] experience with her secondary school children in the UK, learning French and German. She argues that video can motivate her teenage students when practicing listening skills, provided that the sound quality is good. She does not differentiate between using machinima or video as in her view students are motivated by any moving pictures. She uses video or machinima resources to provide an example of words in context. For Myers, authenticity has become one of the most important aspects in her teaching when using video or machinima.

In a recent survey, conducted by the CAMELOT Project team (Dec 2013-Nov 2015) [11], language teachers were asked how they used machinima. They identified three main applications:
- Teachers use ready-made machinima/videos uploaded from YouTube or videos going along with their course books
- Teachers create their own machinima
- Learners are involved in the production of machinima

Both ready-made machinima, as well as machinima created by teachers, were used to focus on a specific language area such as topic based vocabulary, words in context, grammar, listening or writing skills, or as an introduction to a new topic. Creating their own machinima was considered to be quite demanding, especially for those teachers who either did not have the necessary IT skills and equipment or were not supported by their school or institution. Some teachers argued that there are numerous good quality machinima in existence on the web to choose from, so there was no need to create new ones. Another point was that because of users' different teaching and learning styles, not all ready-made machinima will fulfil everybody's tastes, interests or needs.

2.1 Ready-made machinima tend to be viewed more critically

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all possible uses of ready-made machinima in the classroom. Given the limitations we have selected one example where a ready-made machinima entitled, *Cultural Collision in Cairo'* [12], created by teachers, was introduced to a group of teachers in a workshop. The machinima triggered a controversial discussion among the teachers, and this lead to a discussion of whether it was suitable for teaching, which level it should be used for, and what additional support would be required to make it an effective teaching resource. Whereas some teachers claimed that they would not use such machinima in their classroom, others argued that this kind of topic – discussing personal income at a business dinner - would be very effective when used in a multicultural learning environment as it could generate interesting discussions among the learners. Another point emerging from the discussion was that some teachers would have liked to have had more background information about the people involved in the situation. For others, this omission was important as it meant learners would have to apply their problem-solving skills to discover for themselves what the background was. Such an approach could also encourage them to reflect on their own culture. The lack of facial expressions and natural gestures was seen as one negative factor associated with the avatars. It was considered an interesting experiment to produce a video with the same content filming people in real life and find out what difference this would make as regards the flow of discussion and people's perception of the process.

2.2 Involving learners in the filming production

In order to fully engage students in the learning process a task-based approach may be appropriate to give learners opportunities to collaborate and interact with each other, especially when involved in creating their own language learning scenarios. Working towards a final product by creating a machinima together can help learners to practice their language skills and improve their interpersonal skills. Making machinima also helps them to provide evidence of their activities, as well as the production progress and process. In an interview Myers (2014) [13] describes a special technique for

engaging her students in filming. This involves producing the films in front of a green screen [14] in her real life classroom, before creating and adding a background from Second Life to make the videos look more lively and professional. Myers explains that although the teenagers like this medium they do not necessarily like to be filmed and appear in front of a public audience. In order to avoid the learners' anxiety associated with the latter scenario, students are given the option to choose the role they would like to play. In this way, if they do not want to be filmed as a real person, they can choose to be filmed using their avatar or a mask. Myers considers the production process as a significant achievement for the learners as they are immersed in the target language, engage in creative collaboration with each other, practice reading, writing and speaking skills, and most importantly – have fun doing so.

The following experience with an international group of learners of German highlights the importance of learners' involvement in the learning process. The example also demonstrates the significance of extra linguistic and interpersonal features in discussions about the process with the learners. In this case the scenario was a check-in at a hotel. [15] The participants created a dialogue for a couple arriving at a romantic hotel for their honeymoon where they discovered rats running about in the hall. The scene was rehearsed and then filmed at a hotel in Second Life. The recording of the role-play, created by the facilitator, was sent to all the participants, who were then asked to provide feedback on language issues (e.g., pronunciation, intonation etc.). Learners e-mailed their positive feedback to the instructor, prior to a follow-up session and also shared their experience on Facebook with their peers.

The short machinima of the check-in scenario at the hotel was watched with the participants during the next German session in Second Life, where first impressions and feedback were collected and discussed in a relaxed atmosphere around a virtual campfire. It was interesting that the reflection was focused on the experience rather than on the language. One of the participants pointed out how the outdoor toilet reminded her of her childhood at her grandmother's home. Another learner commented that the guests did not seem to mind the outdoor toilet. Reading a dialogue from a script was considered less challenging than speaking without notes, as one learner claimed that it even gave the impression of being fluent in the language. Another participant noted that he would need some more practice with his pronunciation and intonation. Participants admired each other's performances and praised each other for being great actors. Everyone enjoyed the experience and commented very positively on the activity in spite of the quality of the film. Although the learners did not do the filming themselves, it is clear that they felt highly involved in the process and the situation as actors in the scenes.

3. Machinima as tool for Feedback

Learners usually feel more comfortable about analysing their performance in a virtual learning environment where they can hide behind their avatars rather than in a real life classroom (Schomaker 2013) [16]. Learner anonymity may make machinima an ideal tool for giving and receiving feedback. It could help learners evaluate their and other people's performance from a distance.

Watching recordings of their activities can help learners to review and analyse their performance. Learners can decide to reshoot a specific activity or repeat a role-play in order to improve their performance. Ideally learners would record their performance in groups; however, as this is not always possible, the facilitator can record the session or parts of it, provide the learners with the recording and ask them to analyse it individually or in groups. Another option is to provide the learners with the recording containing speech bubbles of the dialogue with the correct language. Following this approach students can switch off the sound and reproduce the dialogue until they feel satisfied with the result.

[Fig. 1] [17]

Based upon learners' performance, documented in the machinima, the facilitator selects language areas to be practiced, adds captions with explanations and links to further activities. In groups learners write a blog about their experiences and post new words and structures to a wiki. [18]

The learners' enjoyment of this experience and their motivation to carry on are the best indicators of a successful outcome. Another sign of an effective learning outcome is if learners engage in completing tasks, interacting and collaborating using the target language, and thereby improve their language skills by building upon previous knowledge.

4. Conclusion

The most effective and rewarding machinima are the ones that involve the learners in the process of discovery and creation. This does not necessarily imply that learners actually make machinima themselves, but that they are involved in the production, either as part of a production team, filming or playing a role for example. Even though the final product is important for learners, the *process* of achievement is even more important. An experience which learners can recall is essential if they are to learn effectively.

For teachers, on the other hand, many of whom may not be familiar with virtual worlds and teach in a physical classroom, making machinima can be very time-consuming and problematic, especially if there is a lack of technical support. Moreover, sound problems or lack of bandwidth are specific issues often highlighted as significant challenges to creating machinima. For some instructors the use of ready-made machinima may be the best solution in this case. Where technical obstacles can be overcome, learning with and through machinima may be highly motivating and rewarding. In addition to the many uses of ready-made machinima in the classroom, an ideal way of using these videos is to review the experience, give peer feedback, analyse and reflect on the learning process.

Given the affordances of learning a language in 3D environments, learners who use machinima may be able to practice situations or simulations which are not possible in a physical classroom and which offer completely new ways of learning. More empirical research is needed on machinima in language learning in order to investigate both the challenges and opportunities this form of digital film-making presents to instructors and learners. This research ought to involve qualitative research involving an ethnographic approach in order to understand perceptions and behaviour in these immersive digital environments.

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