



Ludonarrative Scaffolding in Game-Based L1 Language Learning: Enhancing Literary Understanding through Interactive Prompts

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Abstract

In modern educational research, video games have emerged as an innovative medium for curricular learning and teaching, but how and in which areas they are most effective has yet to be broadly explored to ensure successful implementation in classrooms. Moving beyond basic concepts of understanding and processing text, this research examines how narrative video games promote interpretive skills in L1 learners, focusing on their development of literary competencies in German literature classes. The paper presents a systematic approach to evaluating and unlocking the potential of video game-inherent prompts to effectively scaffold deep language learning through literature: Based on established communication models, these can be interpreted and aligned with explicit cognitively activating task formats. Thus, interactive prompts in games seem to bear inherent potentials for cognitive activation in classroom settings, which is backed up by data from the empirical study. It reveals through a mixed-methods approach how video games' interactive reception fosters literary understanding: Evaluating mid-grade students' abilities to form nuanced character understanding when guided by in-game prompts, results show that prompt-guided explorative gameplay of a narrative digital game positively affects inferential character analysis and reflection when writing about the game's characters compared to traditional instruction. The findings advocate for integrating ludic narratives into advanced language curricula, further bridging the gap between formal and informal language learning.

Keywords: Game-based learning, literary understanding, interpretive skills, ludonarrative scaffolding

1. How Video Games Can Enrich Language Lessons in Literature Learning

The integration of video games into educational contexts is gaining increasing scholarly and pedagogical acknowledgement. A central argument for their inclusion in curricular education posits that leveraging this medium acknowledges and reflects the lived experience of adolescents, thereby bridging a gap between formal education and students' informal, digital media reception [1]. This argument draws on a broad concept of text with a narrative focus that includes diverse forms of media, one that accommodates diverse student interests and the practical reality of mixed-ability classrooms [2]. However, a critical question remains less investigated: Beyond extrinsic factors like heightened motivation, do video games contain intrinsic elements that directly benefit learning processes? This paper argues that interactive game prompts – reception-defining structures that fundamentally distinguish games from linear narratives – constitute one such element. Through an analysis of examples, we will explore in what way game-inherent prompts can be viewed as special forms of meaningful instruction, revealing through results from an empirical study how these inherent mechanics can actively shape and potentially enhance engagement with complex narrative and language learning in L1 literature classes.

2. Scientific Advances in Research on Video Game Use in Literature

The scientific discourse on video games and learning has long been shaped by studies investigating their motivational effects [3,4], a factor widely acknowledged as vital for successful teaching and learning as underscored by meta-studies like Hattie's [5]. While student motivation is undoubtedly a crucial factor for effective learning, an exclusive emphasis on this extrinsic effect risks overlooking the potential of games' inherent mechanics. A focus on motivation alone tends to treat games as a mere vehicle for engagement, neglecting a deeper analysis of their intrinsic instructional qualities.

More recently, educational research has begun to address this gap from two angles. First, there is a

growing acknowledgement of the narrative affinities between video games and more conventional





forms of narrative media [6,7], lending them to consideration in language classes where literature learning forms an important component of the curriculum. Second, yet all the more critically, increasing scholarly effort is being dedicated to pinpointing the specific formal features of games [8] – such as their interactive mechanics, procedural rhetoric, and player agency – that may afford distinct advantages for comprehending and interpreting narrative, thus exploring what makes the medium uniquely suited for literature learning.

However, not a lot of evidence has been collected on where beneficial effects of video game use in formal learning settings originates from, i. e., which features and specifications result in the effects that have been found. This paper seeks to address one such feature in the form of game-inherent prompt structures, discussing how they elicit in players cognitive activities of both language processing and literature learning from a theoretical perspective, underlined by empiric study results that shine a light on the effectiveness of such a video game-based learning environment.

3. How Inherent Prompts in a Narrative Video Game Work as Learning Opportunities

In the selection process of a narrative video game that closely align with the study's underlying interest as closely as possible in its interactivity, A Normal Lost Phone [9] emerged as a potent choice to evaluate the potency of gameplay to promote deep engagement with its literary components. Through prior analysis, it was identified that its puzzle-based, mostly linear narrative structure fittingly leverages intrinsic ludonarrative mechanics to create a non-formal learning environment, an underlying design philosophy quite universal in most genres of video games that can be described as "immersive didactics" [10]. To encourage base-line engagement with its contents, it presents players with an ambivalent premise right on its minimalistic start-up screen: "You just found a phone. Find out the truth." What exactly this "truth" is remains unspecified, but the direct player appeal implies right away that the mentioned "phone" is likely to be a non-trivial object necessary to uncover something not obvious on a surface level. At the same time, it represents a setup for the game's internal structure as well as visual presentation: Starting to play beyond the initial starting screen, players find themselves interacting with a simulated smartphone interface which, even though abstracted via hand-drawn visualization, permits the usage of already automatized scripts of interface operation which are wellinternalized by most mid-grade students, minimizing the extraneous cognitive load introduced by manoeuvring the game UI and control scheme. Because learners don't need to adapt to a widely unfamiliar digital learning environment which would have to be processed as additional information along with learning contents, the risk of a split-attention-effect [11] is minimized.



Fig. 1. The game's narrative has players look into the story behind a mysterious phone's owner.





Importantly for usage in literature learning, the game's non-linear, discovery-driven plot is unlocked through a core loop of selection, reading, and information synthesis. Central to player engagement, progression is governed by prompts that require the correct cognitive synthesis of numeric codes from gathered character-related information and their succeeding input via inherent UI elements, a mechanic that transforms students' engagement with the game's narrative from passive consumption into interactive detective work. This design demands a deep level of character engagement and compels an analytical approach to the text. Players are required to scrutinize language structures with exceptional care so that they can identify important (explicit as well as implicit) information, adequately interpret the meaning and purpose of key dialogue and messages and combine available evidence with logical deductions to formulate and test plausible solutions. By incorporating these prompt structures which function at their core as a form of cognitive prompting [12], the game reinforces the application of essential skills in close reading and interpretation; more importantly, multiple progress-relevant prompts specifically elicit detailed consideration of available character information and the formulation of hypotheses regarding potential ways of solving the problem they're presented with.

3.1 Worked Example: How Unlocking an App Profile Fosters Character Analysis

Targeting and leveraging players' curiosity to encourage their engagement with the narrative, *A Normal Lost Phone* follows up on its premise of the mysteriously found smartphone, letting them know just enough to leave open an array of questions about what happened previous to the phone's loss. From the outset, the game provides players with a limited amount of readily accessible sources of information about its central character called Sam; specifically, a pop-up window right after starting the game redirects them to an app¹ with SMS-style text messages, but they may also choose to view a gallery app, a digital calendar and a music player that contain explicit or implicit character-related information. While the first hurdle to unlock further sources of information – gaining internet access, e. g. to read e-mail – is resolvable through straightforward reading comprehension, the subsequent challenges are designed to initiate more complex cognitive operations.

Crucially, what the video game offers can be seen as a combination of both affordance-type implied encouragement to explore and engage with its content [13], which implicitly lets players know what they can or should interact with through a set of visual cues, and text passages that is meant to be interpreted on an appeal level [14], conveying to players how to look for look for clues that may help them process throughout the game. This way, A Normal Lost Phone utilizes interconnected ways of informal instruction to elicit players' active engagement. For example, when trying to access a fictional dating app, an empty input field that accompanies the on-screen text "This app is protected by a password" [see Fig. 1] and, upon using an input device to select it, opens a number pad, presents one such affordance towards its recipient - i. e., an implicit call-to-action through an interactable element. Even if not outright instructed to, they are meant to deduct an indirect suggestion to try and figure out passwords unlocking the non-disclosed part of the game, then enter them via the number pad. Since trying out random combinations of four-digit numbers is unlikely to yield results, players are pushed towards seeking and finding clues as to which digit sequence could provide a valid solution. This imperative is further reinforced by an email the player discovers, which states: "I'm sure half your passwords are just dates that matter to you." Beyond its literal meaning, this statement must be interpreted on its appeal level as an implicit task: It's here where players need to apply considerations using literary character understanding to the question which "date" might "matter" to the character Sam. While not a primary use case of Schulz von Thun's influential communication model [14] as there is no actual dialogue going on between the player and game character, this passage of in-game text can be interpreted as an intended appeal from the developers to the player. For the implicit task to work, both game designers and writers need to have anticipated how players would read and react to it, meaning for them to connect the dots within the game and conclude that they should take the information specified in it into consideration.

¹ Hereinafter, when the term "app" is used, this refers to separate parts of the game sectioned off by its smartphone-inspired hub screen, each modelled after conventionally established forms of smartphone apps.





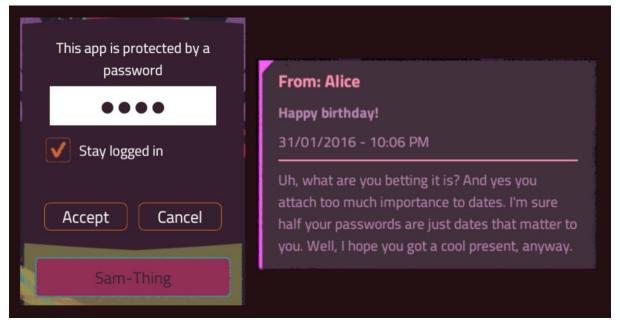


Fig. 2. Players are confronted not only with interactive prompts, but also textual affordances.

This interplay between a technical affordance and appeal level narration elements marks a recurring type of in-game interaction: On a first playthrough, most players will need to get through a total of six such puzzles that require close reading and adequate processing of in-game text. While two of these mainly require text comprehension and another one is mostly a hidden math problem, a total of three of these implicitly presented tasks are closely tied to evaluation and analysis of information about Sam as exemplified above, rendering them fitting anchor points to find out how interactive elements in narrative games can foster learning goals that overlap with those of curricular class settings – in this case, literary character understanding as a central goal of literature learning.

To assess how these game-inherent prompts elicit literature learning, the empirical study compared their effectiveness in their original form to those they would achieve as conventional instruction. Isolating the cognitive activation fostered by the three study-relevant game-inherent prompts, they were each translated into an explicit instructional format based on the above theoretical and practical considerations. The translated tasks were carefully designed to possess a similar potential for cognitive activation [15] and to target comparable processes of literature learning. For instance, the above depicted game prompt requiring players to deduce a character's password was translated into an explicit instructional task: Try to unlock the dating app profile 'Sam-Thing' by considering the following: Which date could be of such importance to Sam that the required password could have been chosen accordingly?" Consequently, this allowed for empirical observation and comparison of literary learning phases achieved in two conditions. While the game mechanics implicitly activate character analysis by requiring players to assess traits and relationships to form substantiated hypotheses, the Instructed condition made these cognitive processes explicit to participants through written instruction conveyed to participants by the learning journal; in the Exploring condition meanwhile, the prompt structures remained unaltered and served as the primary cognitively activating impulses.

4. Empirical Insight into the Effectiveness of Narrative Game to Foster Character Understanding

Moving beyond prior research on the general educational efficacy of digital games, this study focuses on the cognitive activation potential of ludonarrative elements, specifically examining how the described game-inherent prompts intrinsically guide learners in applying and practicing literary analysis competencies. Results show that the described game-inherent prompt structures can do more than sustain engagement; they can actively scaffold discipline-specific thinking.





4.1 Methodology

To empirically assess the potency of learning through the game's interactive elements, a biconditional intervention was designed drawing from the framework published recently as CoDiL [16] for evaluating students' cognitive activation – a concept widely recognized as a key indicator of teaching quality [17]. As the study aimed to capture this with results from heterogenous levels of literary competency, it was conceptualized for mid-grade students and sought to account for multiple school tracks. The core design revolves around utilizing the game along with a digital learning journal as a combined digital learning environment, manipulating experimental conditions via the nature of instructions vs. broad learning goals through the learning journal. A total of 106 ninth-grade students from two German secondary school tracks (*Realschule* and *Gymnasium*) participated. Classes were assigned to one of two conditions, using cluster randomization to prevent assessment contamination effects between conditions:

- 1. Exploring Condition (N=60): This group interacted with the game with minimal guidance. Their goal was to explore the narrative organically, following the game's inherent prompts to achieve broad objectives (e.g., "unlock a specific app").
- 2. Instructed Condition (N=46): This group received explicit, cognitively activating instructional tasks designed to mirror the cognitive processes elicited by the game's implicit prompts as closely as possible.

The intervention was conducted across all classes and conditions by a single researcher to control for instructor bias; to ensure consistency, a standardized protocol with scripted instructions and fixed time allocations was used, along with a checklist and timer to monitor implementation fidelity, time-on-task, and extraneous cognitive load. During gameplay, students were instructed at set intervals to consult and work with the digital learning journal that provided either the explicit tasks (Instructed condition) or mere general goals for in game progress (Exploring condition). Ethical standards were strictly maintained through written informed consent from parents and teachers, student assent, and institutional approval. All data were immediately pseudonymized at collection and stored securely.

Finally, to assess which cognitive activities each participant had successfully applied during the intervention, the study implemented a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis to adequately assess competency levels and statistical analysis to competency test based on empirically validated model of literature learning BOLIVE [18]. After playing through the game from beginning to end over two 90-minute sessions, students were tasked to answer a set of two specifically designed items addressing each of the three levels of literary character understanding modelled in BOL-IVE, for a total of six competency assessment items, testing for their successful application of their literary understanding to the game's main character. Simplified for the purpose of this paper, these hierarchical levels encompass the identification (level 1) of characters and their relationships, analysis (level 2) of explicit and implicit characteristics as well as reflection (level 3) of characters' design in and by the narrative. Written student responses were qualitatively evaluated and systematically coded using a criteria catalogue, deductively constructed on expected answers based on the game's content and inductively refined using pilot data. Aligning with BOLIVE, the catalogue differentiates for each level five nuanced competency phases. E. g., for character analysis (level 2), these outline a gradual progression starting with reproducing characteristics explicitly mentioned in the text (phase 1), developing into a more informed synthesis of those only implicitly conveyed (level 3) and finally being able to coherently form a complex characterization (level 5). Coding the qualitatively evaluated learning outcomes through this rigorously defined catalogue, study results are transformed into ordinal scale data that allows for statistical comparison of results achieved by the Exploring and Instructed conditions, with the test for interrater reliability (sample: 192 items; 15.09% of total) showing substantial agreement between two raters through a weighted Cohen's kappa of $\kappa = .754$.

4.2 Study Results

Data analysis was conducted using Welch's t-test after preliminary assumption checks revealed that the dataset violates normality (Shapiro-Wilk: p < .001) as well as equality of variances (Levene's test: p < .001 for level 2, p = .012 for level 3 results). Each test was calculated with the assumed alternative hypothesis that achieved phases of character understanding on each BOLIVE level would turn out more proficient in the Exploring condition than in the Instructed condition, checking whether cognitive activation was more effectively achieved through largely game-guided reception than when the





implicit instructional elements were presented in an explicit manner. The results provide a more differentiated insight than suggest nuanced effects of the experimental condition.

On the level of character identification (level 1), no significant effect was found (t(103.382) = 0.676, Cohen's d = 0.131, p = 0.250, 95% CI [-0.192, ∞]) The attained phases of character understanding showed comparable proficiency both in the Exploring condition (M = 2.75, SD = 0.816) and the Instructed condition (M = 2.65, SD = .674). This indicates that students were able to apply their ability to identify characters and outline their relationships to the game's narrative, but that it didn't benefit from the game-guided learning condition. Phases achieved by participants ranged from simple reproduction of explicitly mentioned characters (phase 1) across simple (phase 2) or nuanced description of constellations (phase 3) to basic recognition of dynamic and changing relations throughout the story (phase 4) – phase 5, which requires overarching description of constellations taking into account the narrative as a whole, was not achieved by any participant.

However, a significant medium-to-large effect $(t(103.2) = 3.243, Cohen's d = 0.628, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [0.296, <math>\infty$]) was found on participants' proficiency in analysing the protagonist Sam and their development throughout the story (Level 2). Here, students in the Exploring condition (M = 2.400, SD = 0.616) performed better than those in the Instructed condition (M = 2.043, SD = 0.515). This result suggests that the interactive narration approach positively affected students' ability to discern, synthesize, and compare Sam's character traits conveyed throughout the story. Students managed to perform operations from pointing out explicitly described character traits (phase 1), across increasingly nuanced synthesis of such traits from explicit and implicit information (phase 2-3), as well as forming coherent partial characterisations (phase 4). Here, too, no participants didn't achieve phase 5, requiring differentiated characterisation of a character accounting for their development throughout the entire narrative.

Furthermore, results turned out significant regarding character reflection (level 3): The data analysis revealed a smaller yet still positive effect in the Exploring Condition (t(103.998) = 2.498, Cohen's d = 0.481, p = 0.007, SE = 0.201, 95% CI [0.143, ∞]), again outperforming the Instructed Condition (Exploring Condition: M = 2.433, SD = 0.909; Instructed Condition: M = 2.043, SD = 0.698). According to this result, expressing substantiated opinions on the protagonist and reflecting on how they are portrayed over the course of the narrative. While small albeit noticeable number of 3 students didn't provide any answer that could be attributed to a phase of character reflection, the large majority managed to position themselves towards the protagonist (phase 1), substantiating their opinion with simple (phase 2) or nuanced arguments (phase 3) and, in some cases, including the protagonist's narrative design and function into their considerations (phase 4). Here, one student even reached phase 5 by expressing a nuanced position including reflection on how Sam's depiction matched their narrative function.

5. Interpretation, Implications, Limitations

The findings of this study indicate that interactive prompt structures in narrative video games, exemplified by those used by *A Normal Lost Phone*, hold significant potential for eliciting meaningful cognitive activity in L1 students that can benefit formally targeted learning processes, thereby fostering the development of both language skills and literary understanding. Specifically, higher-order cognitive processes seem to benefit from video games' interactive, exploration-centred and experience-based approach to learning. A possible explanation for the absence of effects on the identification level of character understanding lies in the design of relevant prompts inherent to the game which best translate to tasks that target level 2 BOLIVE competencies. Participants' greater performance in reflecting upon the protagonist and their narrative design, then, can be interpreted to correlate with the deeper understanding gained of them through successful level 2 analysis, potentially better enabling substantiated positioning towards the character. Together, the results make a strong point for viewing game-inherent prompts as valid and influential tools for achieving literature learning goals in a new way that enables different kinds of student engagement.

It is crucial, however, to acknowledge the limitations of the present study. Firstly, the conclusions are drawn from the analysis and empirical assessment of effects achieved by a single, exemplary narrative game in a precisely identified field of language learning. While this provides a robust proof of concept, generalizability of these findings across the multitude of facets to the field of language education, along with the vast and heterogeneous landscape of narrative games, requires further validation. Consequently, the empirical insight garnered here must be viewed as a foundational step. Future research is imperative to solidify and expand upon this work by conducting comparable interventions





with a diverse range of game variants, narrative complexities, and specific learning goals. Such a research program will be essential for developing a comprehensive taxonomy of how different interactive mechanics correlate with distinct cognitive and literary learning outcomes.

Bearing in mind these limiting factors, the significance of the findings extends in two primary directions, offering actionable insights for both pedagogy and educational game design. For educators and curriculum developers, the study results underscore the value of video games as a legitimate and enriching component for modern literature classrooms. The key, however, lies in a discerning, evidence-based approach: The potentials to foster learning do not emerge from the medium of video games per se, but are dependent on content-specific and inherent factors, namely purposeful learning opportunities and matching affordances of presented and intended content interaction. The integration of a specific game must be preceded and guided by a critical analysis to identify how specific in-game prompts and interactions function as cognitive tasks targeting outcomes that parallel and actively support students' cognitive efforts made towards desired learning goals. When such an alignment is established, game-based learning moves beyond mere motivational support, with a significant potential to become a purposeful and effective environment for competency training.

Conversely, for developers and designers of educational digital media for literary education contexts, this study highlights a critical design imperative: The most effective learning occurs when didactic principles are woven into the very core of the interactive gameplay experience. The goal should not be to "gamify" literature learning by tacking extrinsic rewards onto self-contained tasks, but rather to integrate educational goals and principles into the gameplay itself by organically weaving cognitive challenges into the narrative progression and core mechanics. This requires a conscious effort to build beneficial cognitive activation, such as hypothesis formation and evidence-based reasoning, directly into the interactive prompts and problems that players are confronted with, which can then lead to deeper engagement with the provided narrative content.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study underscore the potential of narrative video games to serve as engaging and cognitively activating enrichments to L1 literature classrooms. The analysis demonstrates that game-inherent prompts should be interpreted as meaningful tasks that require active, critical engagement with narrative content and can be beneficially implemented to foster literary understanding so long as the cognitive activities demanded of players target the application of competencies we want to further in literature classes. Moving forward, the empirical field will benefit from research that explores the broader application of these principles across different game genres and literary learning goals, which will provide much-needed precision for the effective implementation of game-based learning in diverse educational settings. Thus, the future repertoire curricular literature learning can be enriched by creating learning opportunities that intelligently incorporate narrative games and use their inherent mechanics to invigorate profound, transformative learning processes.

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