DESIGNS FOR LEARNING WITH NARRATIVE DIGITAL GAMES IN FORMAL EFL EDUCATION

Negotiating Material-Discursive Frames at the Nexus of Culture, Text and Task

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List of Abbreviations

CALL	Computer-Assisted Language Learning
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
COE	Council of Europe
DGBLL	Digital Games-Based Language Learning
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EU	European Union
GBLL	Games-Based Language Learning
IF	Interactive Fiction
ISB	*Staatsinstitut für Schulqualität und Bildungsforschung München*
KMK	*Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*
NLG	New London Group
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online RPG
RPG	Role-Playing Game
TBLL	Task-Based Language Learning
TPACK	Technological pedagogical content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler 2006)

ABSTRACT

Vernacular digital games – i.e. games not designed for the purpose of language learning (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013; Reinhardt 2019) – continue to confound consistent realisation in the EFL classroom. On the one hand, digital games are a culturally significant medium, embedded in learner lifeworlds and capable of engaging the mechanics of learning in uniquely expressive ways. Narrative digital games in particular, which are the core focus of this dissertation, speak meaningfully to the experience of living in and conversing with a (digitally-)diverse, interface-laden, and identity-confounding world. Despite these potentials, digital vernacular games are less present in formal EFL classroom contexts than other authentic, culturally-meaningful media and have frequently been described as difficult to work with or simply ill-suited to the demands of formal education. In approaching this gap between promise and practice from a sociomaterial view, this dissertation seeks to renegotiate existing and remixed discourses on game and media studies, discourse and literacies-informed perspectives to language learning and teaching, alongside the articulated agendas of formal language education. The dissertation will propose how these renegotiated discourses might offer new inroads for educators seeking to engage with narrative digital games in the EFL classroom as part of navigating the ongoing and persistent digital transformation of formal, secondary school language education.

INTRODUCTION

'CONFRONTING THE SINGING MACHINES'

NARRATIVE DIGITAL GAMES IN FORMAL SECONDARY EFL EDUCATION

In the introduction to Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, widely acknowledged as one of the early major academic works to tackle the storytelling potentials of the digital medium, Murray opines:

> "I find myself longing for a computer-based literary form even more passionately than I have longed for computer-based educational environments, in part because my heart belongs to hackers. I am hooked on the charm of making the dumb machines sing." (Murray 2017a, 9; originally published in 1997)

This passage speaks to Murray's desire for the technology of the time to realize its expressive potential – not just as a tool for getting things done in education[1], but as an aesthetic medium with its own propensities for emotive, artful and culturally-situated meaning making.
Since Murray's seminal work, digital technologies have continued to evolve, and academic and professional fields related to digital design, media studies and game criticism have similarly matured. The argument can be made that we have long gotten better at authoring digital media that effectively 'sing' as artists, authors, designers and laypeople of different backgrounds and expertise have found their voice within a diversely digital cultural landscape (see Murray 2012; Ensslin 2014; Isbister 2017). As such, both inside formal educational contexts and outside of them[2], this means that our learners are now effectively surrounded by 'singing machines' – whether this be in the form of tweets, TikTok posts, Instagram stories or, as is the focus of this dissertation, digital games. The permeation of digital media into the social fabric has been met with calls from all levels of the educational establishment to better prepare learners for lifelong, healthful, and responsible engagement with digital technology. It has become pertinent for

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[1] This passage was written in the context of Murray's experience designing digital educational tools and platforms during her time at MIT (Murray 2017a)

[2] Formal vs. informal learning (OECD n.d.): Formal leaning is organized, structured learning, i.e. 'classroom learning' and, for the purposes of this dissertation, synonymous with 'compulsory education' as this applies to the German secondary school context. In contrast, informal learning can be incidental and non-intentional or leaning that is not associated with an institutional context. It is important to distinguish since some literature on the learning potential of vernacular digital games is often focused on informal learning, rather than learning in the formal context of a syllabus supported classroom (See Reinders & Benson 2017). This dissertation is definitively concerned with learning with digital games *in* the formal, secondary school language classroom.

educators and educational researchers to ask: What role do or can digital games play in the education of language learners? And how pertinent is the usage of digital games in formal educational contexts – not just for mediating the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge and enabling the practice of subject-specific competencies – but in addressing the digital divides and social and cultural complexities implicated within the digital transformation of education? In confronting digital games as 'singing machines', this dissertation leans into the cultural and expressive heft[3] of the medium and considers how we might go about designing for learning with digital games – particularly narrative digital games – in language education.

Despite digital games' penetration within the social and economic spheres[4], the discourse surrounding digital games in the lives of youth and within the formal educational system is diverse and, at times, divisive. On extreme ends of this discourse, games have been lauded as a reforming force within education, capable of engaging our 'so-called' disengaged youth while simultaneously being denounced as compromising more serious educational endeavours or putting our youth and societies at risk (see Thomas 2012). In the middle of these extremes are many examples of well-meaning educators and researchers who have attempted to leverage varying degrees of 'gameful' practices (Reinhardt 2019) in the language classroom who have then experienced complex, unexpected, or at times underwhelming results (see Jones 2018; de Castell et al. 2017; de Castell & Jenson 2018a; McNeil 2020). While the literature on digital games-based language learning (DGBLL) is indeed expanding (see Reinhardt 2019, Blume 2019, Blume 2020, Sykes & Reinhardt 2013; Cornille, Thorne & Desmet 2012), *vernacular* digital games – or digital games not designed for the purposes of language education (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013) – are still broadly considered challenging to implement in formal educational practice – even when their potential is acknowledged (see Blume 2020; Chik 2012; Chik 2014; de Castell et al. 2017). In adopting a sociomaterial paradigm for conceptual research in TEFL (see Chapter 1.1.3.), this dissertation approaches these varied accounts regarding the conflicted potentials for vernacular game-based learning with curiosity and as indicative that reconfigured frames of engagement are

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[3] For the purposes of this dissertation, 'expressive media' refers to any media designed or consumed with aesthetic and/or affective intention, such as film, literature, music, and digital games.

[4] As evidenced by: blockbuster games that are typically more expensive and take in more revenue than blockbuster films (Kamenetz 2013; Richter 2020); the JIM-Studie (2022) which indicates that 90% of girls and 95% of boys between the ages of 12 and 19 self-report playing games at least once a month in Germany; digital games have been formally recognized as a *Kulturgut* in Germany as evidenced by the industry's 2008 inclusion in the *Deutschen Kulturrat* (Germany's Ministry of the Arts) (JIM-Studie 2018, 55); digital games now have several award categories at the British BAFTA awards (indeed, this is a good source of finding good games for the classroom); and increasingly digital games are reviewed as individual titles through respected news outlets such as the *New Yorker*, *the New York Times*, *the Guardian, Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal.*

needed – particularly in relation to the primarily single-player[5], narrative games that are the focus of this dissertation. In re-negotiating the discourses that formulate classroom possibilities for narrative digital games in language education, this dissertation attends to relational factors – both material and discursive (Barad 2015; see Chapter 1.2.) – that perform together when gameplay is brought into formal learning situations. The assemblage of relational factors that will be considered here includes: educational actors and their formal, secondary-school learning contexts (i.e. European; German; Bavarian); formal educational agendas and curricular instruments; literacies-informed pedagogies for digital language education; narrative digital gametexts[6] as read through the methodological lenses of 'expressive texts', 'task environments' and 'cultural discourse'; and the diverse digital cultures that underpin the digital transformation of formal education. In doing so, this dissertation takes for granted that: Digital games are complex cultural objects and aesthetic texts which demand their own discourse tradition (see Chapter 2.3.2.); Digital games require their own criticism but are also intimately connected to other media (see Chapter 2.3.1.); Digital games are a present force within the lifeworlds of a large portion of the digitally-engaged public, including adolescent language learners (see Chapter 6.2.). In adopting a sociomaterial paradigm for theoretical research (see also Chapter 1.2.) into narrative digital games for language education, this dissertation will address the following questions:

- How might the material-discursive landscape of narrative digital games in and around language education be (re)negotiated and (re)formulated into an evaluative apparatus for narrative digital games (i.e. ludonarratives) in the formal, secondary EFL classroom?
- What designs for learning are implicated within such an evaluative apparatus – particularly as regards engaging with ludonarratives as task environments, expressive texts and cultural discourse?
- What are the implications of designing for learning with narrative digital games in language education, particularly as concerns the role of ludonarratives, of educators and of the agendas of TEFL within the digital transformation of formal education?

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[5] As will be addressed later in this dissertation (e.g. Chapter 4), it is important to note that a significant portion of existing research into vernacular digital games in language education is concerned with interaction between game players either in multiplayer gameworlds, in the classroom or through shared online spaces (see Newgarden & Zheng 2016; Reinders & Wattana 2015; Steinkuehler 2007; Suh et al. 2010; Voulgari 2011; Zhao & Lai 2008). Less has been written regarding the interaction between language learners and single-player, narrative games.

[6] This dissertation will frequently refer to individual vernacular game titles as 'gametexts'. See Chapter 1.3.1. for a more developed definition.

This dissertation is theoretical and conceptual in nature and, in addition to engaging closely with a range of narrative gametexts, draws from existing research in language education, literacies studies and culture, media and game studies. In doing so, this dissertation aims to render digital games more didactically accessible to formal language learning educational settings.

PART I

NEGOTIATING THE MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE LANDSCAPE OF NARRATIVE DIGITAL GAMES IN FORMAL SECONDARY EFL EDUCATION

1. Cutting through the noise: The promise and problem of vernacular digital games in educational discourse and practice

For every perceived opportunity offered by digital play for education, there are reported challenges to leveraging digital gameplay in formal educational contexts in practice – particularly in the case of *vernacular* games, or games that have not been designed for the purposes of language education (Reinhardt 2019). Digital game-based language learning (DGBLL) researcher Jonathan Reinhardt notes that although vernacular game creators have not designed games for language learning *per se*, such games can nonetheless be adopted into the formal language learning context:

> "just as any authentic artifact or media like a news article or film might be used to learn or teach a language. Designers embed narratives into games that can be leveraged as L2 learning resources, and players can learn from the emergent interactions during gameplay, as well as from the attendant discourse practices around gameplay through interaction with gamer communities and their resources." (Reinhardt 2019, 9)

Digital games, however, are not leveraged in formal language education at the frequency of the aforementioned 'news articles and film' despite the hype regarding the alleged learning affordances of games (Gee 2003) and their potential for motivating engagement from young and adolescent learners (Thomas 2012). Instead, there is a lingering gap between the potential of games for learning and their implementation in formal language learning classrooms. The following sections will consider how this gap has been approached in the literature to date (Chapter 1.1.) and how we might re-negotiate this gap from a sociomaterial standpoint (Chapter 1.2.).

1.1. Vernacular digital games in EFL education between promise and practice

As established in the introduction, the discourse surrounding the role of digital games in the lives of youth and across educational contexts is diverse and, at times, contradictory. On the one

hand, games have been described as having great potential for learning when leveraged appropriately (Gee 2003; Reinhardt & Thorne 2016; Reinhardt 2019). On the other hand, digital games have been described as an innately challenging medium to engage with, especially in *formal* learning contexts (Chik 2014; Jones 2018; Blume 2020; de Castell et al. 2017; de Castell & Jenson 2018ab). Michael Thomas (2012) has described a range of reactions to digital games in formal educational contexts, ranging from frustration at the perceived triviality of games to the lauding of gameplay for its potential to address the "disconnect between learners and learning in formal educational contexts" which may be derived from "the rise of product-oriented or 'high-stakes' educational testing in certain contemporary education systems" (Thomas 2012, 14). James Paul Gee, a career linguist and literacies researcher who is one of the most well-known disseminators of the learning potential of digital games (Gee 2003; 2008), has long equated good game design with good learning principles in that games, e.g. encourage problem solving; require the use of multiple, cross-disciplinary competencies; carefully scaffold players in learning to play the game; and encourage active engagement with new textual material and unfamiliar discourses. In speaking on the potential games have for language learning specifically, Gee concludes:

> "the main thing games can do for language learning is to 'situate meaning'. Games associate words with images, actions, goals and dialogue, not just with definitions or other words. Learners come to see how words attach to the world's contexts or situations that they are about and help to create or manipulate. If learners can only 'cash out' words for words, they have a purely verbal understanding of talk and texts. This may be good for test passing but it is not good for deep understanding. If they can 'cash out' words for images, experiences, actions, goals and dialogue – for a virtual theatre of motivated action in their minds – then they have deep understanding and real learning." (Gee 2012, xiv)

Carolyn Blume (2019) argues that games are additionally relevant for language education in that they facilitate the development of both cultural and linguistic capital, where access to gameplay experiences and opportunities to grow one's game literacy might be formulated as a goal of a language education that is sensitive and responsive to addressing the digital divide between adolescent learners with differing degrees of access to game media. This concern aligns with contemporary aims of formal educational systems, including within Germany, to embrace the digital transformation of education specifically and society more broadly (see Chapter 2.1.1. and Chapter 8). Additionally, digital games have long been seen as important to youth culture and as thematically relevant for young language learners (see Ito & Bittanti 2009; mpfs 2022; mpfs 2023). As educators, we might additionally be curious to understand how games function within learner lifeworlds and the negotiation of learner language and literacies practices between cultural spheres and boundaries in a digitalized and globalized era (see Chapter 6.2.) – Particularly as this

pertains to roles learners play while leveraging all their languages – the linguistic and the non-linguistic – in a persistently digital future.

1.1.1. Established hypotheses on the gap between promise and practice

Even though games tantalizingly resonate with features of what is popularly considered 'good learning design' (Gee 2003) and although they may additionally align with the growing digital agendas of formal education (see Chapter 2.2.1.), digital games as actual classroom objects have often been depicted in terms of frustration. Common complaints include:

'Games do not engage all of our learners.'

Some teachers and researchers have approached digital games in the language classroom with the explicit or implicit hypothesis that they will be (perhaps inherently) motivating for a digital generation of learners, but this expectation is at times frustrated by a more complex array of responses (See de Castell & Jenson 2018; Jones 2018; Iten & Petko 2016). For example, in one Canadian study where teachers and researchers designed a teaching unit for exploring narrative concepts using the game *LostWinds 2,* some learners were highly demotivated by the game in practice – purportedly female learners in particular, who were also much less likely to complete the game than their male classmates (de Castell & Jenson 2018a).[7] Another case study conducted by Roger Dale Jones involved a teacher leading their learners in a discussion of positive and negative aspects of digital games alongside a discussion of their own gaming preferences (Jones 2018, 203-208). He comments that pupils gave what the teacher saw as underwhelming and uncritical responses when questioned about their gaming habits. Jones theorized that such responses could be due to the pressures of the social context (games being seen as mismatched to the academic environment) or due to methodological framing that simplified games as either 'good' or 'bad'. Rather than being demotivated by the games themselves, learners may instead be demoralized by the re-contextualization of games from a private past-time to a school topic, especially where their own gaming practices and identities as gamers are under threat of being viewed, at best, simplistically or, at worst, judgmentally (ibid.). Indeed, multiple studies have drawn attention to the problem of educators and researchers

[7] Within a presentation the authors gave on this topic, they theorize that this occurred due to a socialized response to games in general, whereas gaming is opposed to the cultural values of the girls in question (de Castell & Jenson 2018b). I would question the degree to which this may also be complicated by the game selection itself, in terms of the game's genre and ludonarrative quality (see Chapter 3.3.).

encroaching on the private spheres of learners when such studies target learners' practices in larger gaming communities (e.g. McNeil 2020; Pasfield-Neofitou 2011; Steinkuehler 2006).

Reinhardt argues that theories of motivation in language learning can clarify some of these complex reactions to games in formal learning contexts due to these theories' recognition that motivation is "dynamic and associated with identity" as well as "situationally dependent" (Reinhardt 2019, 69). Further, where games are used successfully in the classroom, motivation may stem less from the game itself being 'fun' and more from supportive instructional design (see Iten & Petko 2016) and a detailed understanding of game designs that are as likely to engage as to disengage learners (see Whitton 2011). So, even though 'good' learning principles may be baked into 'good' games by design (Gee 2003), they are also rarely self-contained solutions and curriculum-aligned learning machines in their own right.

'Games are ill-suited to formal learning environments, like the classroom.'

On the one hand, such an argument may relate to real material constraints in the classroom where the digital infrastructure for accessing games is unavailable, unpredictable or unfamiliar.[8] On the other hand, this perspective may be held by teachers who have a deficit of experience with the medium (see Blume 2020; Chik 2012). In one of the aforementioned case studies conducted by Jones which involved German secondary school pupils engaging with the topicality of games – i.e. where pupils were tasked with discussing games, gaming practices and gaming culture, but where no games were played in the classroom – even using games as a topic of discussion was seen to be problematic. The teacher in question acknowledged to some degree how her own unfamiliarity with the medium made it difficult to formulate and deliver game-informed tasks (Jones 2018, 242 & 247).

Game researcher Alice Chik has worked to reconcile the gap between the informal gaming practices of learners and formal classroom learning agendas and practices – and has found, at times, these contexts to be unresolvable despite the clear affordances of informal play practices for learning (Chik 2012; Chick 2014). Indeed, even Gee acknowledges that while games often involve good learning design, the instrumentalization of 'authentic' games in educational contexts as adheres to the formal agendas and objectives of such contexts is far from straightforward (Gee 2003). This can be due to logistical challenges: Many games are too long to be played in full in the classroom and feature pacing that is outside of the educator's control (see

[8] Although, as will be explored in Chapters 5 and 6, engagement with narrative digital games does not always require direct access to the game in the classroom.

Schell 2008, 443-444; although, within independent game development there is a trend towards creating appealing, shorter games as well; see also Chapter 5); It can be challenging to purchase games for the classroom (although services like Apple's School Manager have made this easier); Certain games may be restricted to consoles that are less classroom friendly (although, increasingly, the trend is for developers to release popular games across as many platforms as possible, including on classroom-accessible devices, such as tablets[9]).

Additionally, educators may find it challenging to align formal educational standards and learning objectives to vernacular digital gameplay since, to a greater or lesser degree, learners have quite a bit of autonomy in terms of how they engage with a game – both in terms of the choices they can make inside of a gameworld and the impressions they then walk away with (see Chapter 2.1.1. for a discussion of games as 'possibility spaces'). These choices and impressions are not always easy to predict and, consequently, are challenging for educators to observe, evaluate and design for (see de Castell & Jenson 2017 on 'the ideal gamer'; also Chapter 2.1.1.). This is especially relevant since it is typically impossible to directly adapt game media as – unlike analogue expressive media – digital games are designed from literal 'black boxes' of code. Additionally, well-meaning classroom interventions could unintentionally 'spoil' the experience of play, making something that was meant to be motivating for 'players', tedious and cumbersome for 'learners as players'.[10] These competing motivations for using games in formal classrooms – to fulfil learning objectives versus to motivate learners – can consequently feel unresolvable. This dissertation will ultimately argue that more sophisticated framing is needed for vernacular games in TEFL – including more nuanced articulations of learning potentials for narrative digital games and more contextualized purposes for play. Teachers need reasons for turning on a game in the classroom beyond 'it's potentially motivating' or 'it's somewhat thematically relevant to the lesson of the day'.

'Games are trivial or promote poor media habits'

Attitudes and beliefs of educators may determine what value, or lack of value, is recognized in the medium: "debunkers may dismiss games as mere 'ice breakers' and 'gap fillers',

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[9] Tablets, such as the iPad, are increasingly capable of running games that previously would have been available through a console or PC only due to advancements in technology (e.g. Apple's M-chips). A threat to this positive trend is the increase in subscription-based services (Netflix games, Apple Arcade, Playstation Plus) which are difficult – if not legally impossible – to use in the classroom context.

[10] In effect exchanging the 'chocolate-covered broccoli problem' of working with educational games to the 'broccoli-covered chocolate problem' of working with vernacular games in an overly didacticized manner (see Reinhardt 2019, 10).

or activities for a rainy day and no more. Administrators may go further and ban them altogether as 'disruptive' activities that threaten a 'serious' learning environment, thus confirming the opposition of 'enjoyment' and 'fun' to so-called learning" (Thomas 2012). Ian Bogost similarly suggests that a "quandry emerges from the correlation between videogames and children's culture. That quandry is *triviality*. Videogames are considered inconsequential because they are perceived to serve no cultural or social function save distraction at best, moral baseness at worst." (Bogost 2007, viii). The most extreme positions within this line of thought involve a pathologization of the medium as socially and/or individually 'unhealthy'. It is important to note that many early arguments involving a pathologization of the medium ('digital games make youth violent') have been found to be lacking in contemporary research (e.g. Ferguson 2015; Vourre et al. 2022). Current relevant controversies often relate to toxic culture in online game-based affinity spaces (e.g. Castello 2018) and young people's exposure to predatory game mechanics (such as 'loot boxes'; e.g. Busby 2018).

Rather than having an attitude of outright hostility towards the medium, educators may instead have a generally narrow view of the possible roles for games in language education. For instance, they might see digital games as primarily useful for gamifying especially mundane language learning activities which learners find most repetitive and boring – e.g. practicing vocabulary (see Cobb & Horst 2011; Hitosugi et al. 2014; Ranalli 2008) – or only leveraging games that feature communication as this is typically seen between people in the 'real world' – i.e. games that allow for person-to-person interactional communication between players either inside of a game or outside of a game (e.g. on online forums or social media) where communication between people is mediated by digital environments, rather than interaction with the game itself being seen as itself a form of communicative engagement (see also Chapter 4).

Ultimately, whether games are perceived as a viable option for the classroom is highly dependent on their perceived value. If educators do not value the medium, then uptake will be challenging. That being said, there is evidence that this concern could be overstated. For example, Blume's study on pre-service teachers' attitudes towards games in language education indicated that more pre-service teachers see potential in digital games than not – but that inexperience with the medium (both in personal and in educational settings) was a barrier to engagement and uptake (Blume 2020).

What becomes clear in engaging with these different discourses on games-based learning is that there is, at times, a wide gap between games as promise and in practice. Proposed reasons for the disconnect that have already been mentioned include: success in utilizing the medium may be

tied up in the beliefs and attitudes of educators and learners who may generally be sceptical of or who generally lack experience with the medium – especially in formal educational settings; and a real or perceived misalignment of digital – particularly commercial – gameplay with formal educational processes and agendas.

1.1.2. Renegotiating the gap between promise and practice

While the aforementioned arguments characterizing the gap between promise and practice are indeed relevant, this dissertation proposes that there are additional insights that can be derived from a detailed reading of the material-discursive tension at play between (narrative, primarily vernacular) games and the formal TEFL context – especially as this concerns the alignment of digital play to TEFL agendas in formal educational contexts (i.e. Bavarian/German secondary schools for the purposes of this dissertation). As I will address below, I contend that certain taken-for-granted discourses that have traditionally been relied upon when talking about games in education may in fact contribute to the tension between games as promise and in practice, particularly where – as will be argued below – the discourses focused on games and gaming are too monolithic, too reductive and/or too focused on the commercial culture of play. This deconstruction (and eventual) reformulation of the discursive lenses that frame engagement with digital vernacular games is indicative of the sociomaterial paradigm that has been adopted within this dissertation on the whole. As will be outlined in more detail in Chapter 1.2., such a paradigm challenges the centrality of human intentionality in inquiry and practice, treats existing discursive boundaries with curiosity, and generally "removes the conceptual blinkers that obscure how educational practices are shaped by materials." (Mills 2016, xxiii). As this applies to the tension between games as promise and in practice, I propose that before discounting games as misaligned to the formal TEFL teaching context as we understand it, or before we solely attribute the difficulty to the individual readiness of educators and learners towards digital games in education, it is worthwhile to additionally interrogate the degree to which our current discourses for gaming in language education are 'fit for purpose'. As a starting point for this process of deconstruction and negotiation, I suggest that the following discourses could be problematic for educators' engagement with digital games in their classrooms:

a) The degree to which pre-existing understandings of analogue play in TEFL practice align with the material-discursive situation of digital play;
b) The influence of commercial culture on the definitions and roles that we ascribe to digital play in educational settings;

c) The degree to which we are holding to a monolithic notion of games and gaming, both in education specifically and in society more generally.

a) TEFL understandings of analogue versus digital play

Digital games sometimes fit uncomfortably within pre-existing roles defined for analogue play in the EFL classroom. Analogue gameplay has long been established in language teaching practice where games have been used as learning tools and as method (e.g. gamified language practice, such as playing "Simon Says" to practice certain lexical items; or using role plays and drama pedagogy to simulate communicative situations). The digitalization of games has somewhat blurred these established roles, particularly in the case of narrative games. On the one hand, digital games draw from an ever-expanding range of semiotic resources and genre conventions, thus creating stronger relationships between 'games' and more traditional expressive media in EFL, such as written and graphic literature, film and art. This can be seen, for instance, in current manifestations of popular game franchises, such as *Super Mario Odyssey*, which features elaborate filmic cut-scenes that serve a narrative function throughout the game. This additionally involves a broadening consideration of which competencies and literacies are, in fact, engaged through digital play. There is a general lack of studies where games are both played and treated as cultural texts and narrative media artifacts, particularly within foreign language contexts. Most studies of games in EFL focus on language acquisition or communicative practice inside of game environments or in online gamer spaces and tend to side-line games as texts and cultural content. Notably, when games are regarded as complex media, this can be quite disruptive to understandings of, e.g. communicative competencies as taken for granted in language education (i.e. as evidenced in the *Bildungsstandards* or the *CEFR*; see Chapter 2.2.1.). As argued by literacies researcher Catherine Beavis: "Games function as 'networked semiotic domains' – little universes of meaning, where multiple domains interact and work together. […] Information is presented simultaneously in a number of forms. Players need to be able to interpret multiple sign systems and interactions, both singly and in combination, in order to play." (Beavis 2022, 108). In considering these complex and variable semiotic domains, Beavis further argues that "Games complicate notions of reading, interpretation, and construction in quite literal ways; blurring "reading" and "writing" (making/creating) and presenting new or hybrid forms" (Beavis 2022, 108). An additional consequence of the 'digitality' of games is that the extensive range of semiotic resources and media conventions available to game designers within the digital medium means that gametexts can be incredibly diverse, making generalizing between different play experiences difficult (see also Chapter 2.3.). Additionally, when we compare digital games to their

analogue cousins, the internal architecture of digital games is much less transparent to the user. In an analogue game, we can generally see all the pieces that make a game work, and the game works as anticipated because everyone negotiates and agrees on a particular set of rules. Within the classroom, educators can manipulate these negotiable game elements to meet their selected learning objectives. In a digital game, the pieces and rule-systems that make the game function are typically obscured behind a black box of largely inaccessible code. This black box of code can be seen as a *procedural* affordance of the digital medium (Murray 2012; Murray 2017a) and has remarkable consequences for game audiences, including within educational contexts, and will be explored in greater depth later in this dissertation (see Chapter 2).

b) The commercial culture of digital play

Another discursive barrier that I would propose regarding the use of vernacular games is that the language used to talk about digital gameplay experiences in education – and the kinds of games identified as valuable in vernacular play – is often still highly derived from the *commercial* culture of play. As is evidenced in the following examples:

An over-reliance on popular commercial genres in describing play experiences: 'Popular game genres' are seen here to be typical commercial categories for games, such as Shooters, RPGs, Action-Adventures, Point-and-Click Adventures, and Text Adventures.[11] Such categories are used to market games for particular game audiences and suggest specific gameplay mechanics and tropes. However, they by no means illuminate the learning affordances and TEFL-relevant competencies likely to be fostered by a particular game (see Chapter 2.2. for a more detailed discussion). This is made more complicated within digital games as a maturing medium that features the regular mixing and re-mixing of game genres as well as the recruitment of expressive devices from other media to the point that, increasingly, there are games that do not fit neatly into any particular category (see Chapter 2.3.; see also Clarke et al. 2015). Game theorist Jesper Juul, in describing the independent (or 'indie') game movement, has described *aesthetically* independent games as those which "use styles and design principles that set them apart from mainstream games" (Juul 2019, 13) and *culturally* independent games as those that

[11] Popular game genres: This refers to game genres as they are popularly defined – i.e. within the commercial culture of digital play – and does *not* refer to games that are considered 'popular' per se. Genres that will feature in this dissertation include: Arcade Games & Platformers, Interactive Fiction (and Visual Novel Games), Graphic & Point-and-Click Adventures, Strategy Games & Management Sims, Walking Simulators, Sandbox Games, Action-Adventures, Shooters, Racing Games, RPGs (Role-Playing-Games), Puzzle Games, Open-World Adventures

"carry a cultural, political, and moral promise: that independent games provide better and more satisfying lives for game developers, that independent games better represent the diversity of experiences people have, that independent games make the world a better place." (ibid 14). As I have argued previously, relatively short, independent games are particularly accessible and appealing for the language classroom – in terms of classroom accessibility, length, relationship to foreign language competencies, and thematic and expressive depth – however, such games are also especially likely to fit poorly in established popular game genres (see Stannard 2022).

Overemphasis on platforms, which is largely irrelevant to what play experiences one has access to: Especially in market research or demographics research involving game-based practices, there can be an over-prevalence of distinguishing between games based on the devices used to play them, i.e. mobile games vs. console games vs. computer games. This information is relatively easy to collect and is perhaps attractive for the commercial game industry in terms of knowing the size of their market. To consider an example relevant to the educational context in Germany, one might consider the *JIM-Studie*, which collects and presents data on adolescent media use in Germany. This data collection is performed by the *Medienpädagogische Forschungsverbund Südwest* (mfps) to "serve as a basis for discussion and activities within media education, politics and in educational institutions – for all those who live and work with children and adolescents" (mpfs n.d., translation mine[12]). The only category they use when talking about 'groups' of games is based on platform. Of course, most of the games that youth list as their favourite games as reported by the *JIM-Studie* are available in some form or another across all platforms. Indeed, cross-platform play is a hallmark of commercially successful games (see below). Platform is perhaps most helpful in determining which kinds of devices learners likely have access to (although this is also covered in more detail elsewhere in the study).

Overemphasis on the most commercially successful, popular and/or accessible games: Additionally, some research has focused on recruiting games that are considered 'most popular' with youth. At first glance, this is understandable when attempting to recruit media that could be most relevant to learner lifeworlds into the classroom. However, I argue it is important to consider why these games are popular to begin with. For example, the 2022 *JIM-Studie* has

[12] Original text: "Die Studien des mpfs dienen als Diskussions- und Arbeitsgrundlage für Medienpädagogik, Politik und Bildungseinrichtungen – für alle die mit Kindern und Jugendlichen zusammenleben und arbeiten." (mpfs n.d., n.p.)

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collected a list of the following top games that youth self-report as being among their top three favourite games (see Table 1):

Table 1: Top Games Played by Youth in Germany according to the 2022 *JIM-Studie* (mpfs 2022)

Game titles	**% of respondents who named said title as among their top three favourite games (JIM-Studie 2022)**
Minecraft	19%
FIFA	18%
Fortnite	12%
The Sims	7%
Mario Kart	7%
GTA – Grand Theft Auto	7%
Hay Day	5%
Subway Surfers	5%
Call of Duty	4%
Clash of Clans	4%
Candy Crush	4%

There are some notable features to unpack from this list of games. First, many of the games are **cross-platform**, meaning versions of the game are available across all major gaming devices (mobile, console, desktop). Additionally, some of these cross-platform games, such as *Fortnite* and *Minecraft*, also feature **cross-play**, meaning people can play together even if they own different devices. The accessibility of these games mean they can easily be shared with friends and a community can be built around these games even at the secondary school level, meaning their social appeal is also high. Second, many of the 'games' featured here are in fact popular **game franchises.** Some of these game franchise titles, such as the *FIFA* games, are also typically sold alongside consoles as a package deal. As the study doesn't seem to distinguish between individual titles in the franchises named (i.e. there are many *FIFA* games, many *Call of Duty* games, and many *The Sims* games), these franchises may also be somewhat overrepresented here. Thirdly, many of the games are either low-cost (*Minecraft*) or exist in **free-to-play** versions (*Fortnite, The Sims, FIFA, Hay Day, Clash of Clans, Candy Crush*). Free-to-play games are understandably popular within a demographic who – overall – are less likely to be able to make their own purchasing decisions – especially on digital storefronts, which require a credit card or similar. It is important to note, however, that although such games may initially be accessed for free (meaning parental permission or personal resources is not a barrier to access), these games tend to make significant sums of money through advertising and/or through **'in-app**

purchases' – purchases that are often made appealing through the use of predatory, casino-like mechanics (e.g. Loot Boxes). Fourthly, many of these titles feature **open-ended play:** The games are either sandboxes and simulations (*The Sims; Minecraft*), which have no fixed end point or multiplayer games that are more sport-like (FIFA), which are meant to be played repeatedly. What makes these games 'popular' may, therefore, involve more than 'good game mechanics', but rather relates to their marketability, brand recognition, purchasability and playability, accessibility across multiple platforms, and the inclusion of cross-play functionality.

Notably, many of these games feature weak narratives. In contrasting the list above to the narrative games that are the focus of this dissertation, narrative games generally feature a natural ending point. In contrast, most of the popular games featured in the *JIM-Studie* list can be played endlessly – meaning even those games that need to be purchased feature a strong cost-to-play time ratio. Notably, the *only* overtly narrative game in the *JIM-Studie's* list is the notorious *Grand Theft Auto* series of games (which also features sandbox and open-ended multiplayer play).

It is important to mention that the accessibility of these games for adolescents also makes them accessible to educators and researchers who may lack the funding or the necessary infrastructure (e.g. a classroom set of tablets; an Apple Classroom Manager account linked to their institution) to purchase game titles in bulk. For instance, in a study by Levi McNeil, games were chosen that "were free, could be played on mobile devices, and had active associated online spaces" (McNeil 2020, 110). While this is an understandable impulse, the axiom 'you get what you pay for' should be taken seriously when evaluating game titles for the language classroom. A shift in mindset might be required for practitioners who are used to taking advantage of free and freely accessible digital tools and content online and applying these curatorial practices to game titles. As with other expressive media curated for the classroom (e.g. novels, film), a consideration of quality and overall 'fit' for the classroom is imperative.

The misleading distinction between 'commercial games' and 'serious games': If commercial games for entertainment are considered the default, then it is unsurprising that the category of 'serious games' or 'games for learning' would be established as a counterpoint. That commercial games for entertainment would be taken as the default is particularly ironic since, historically, many of the first digital games were educational, e.g. *The Oregon Trail* and *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego*. The issue that I take with these categories is that while the distinction establishes different contexts of play, it says nothing about which play experiences could be anticipated from any particular game in whichever category and what actual value these play experiences offer for learning. A game in one or the other category 'could' functionally – in their core mechanics – be the same. An example of this is the UNICEF game *Right Runner*, which is a

simple run-jump platformer (e.g. in the vein of the *Super Mario* games). Additionally, some games, particularly from independent game creators, sit in neither category neatly. Rather than attending to how games 'market' themselves for entertainment or education, I argue that one has to look beyond this and consider the kinds and quality of negotiation of meaning afforded by individual gametexts (see Chapter 3.3.).

c) A monolithic notion of games and gaming

The previous two points are part of a general discursive problem regarding digital games. Digital games are aggressively diverse as a medium – And not just in terms of thematic content, as is true of other expressive media, but in terms of their basic functionality (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion). And yet, perhaps due to the perceived 'triviality' of games (Bogost 2007, viii), games have been discussed in recent history as one monolithic kind of media featuring functional commonalities for the audiences that play them. But as argued by game researcher Katherine Isbister in comparing games to more established media, such as film:

> "We would never lump Hollywood action films, Sundance winners, and nature documentaries together when discussing the impact of film. We see these as different kinds of works, using different techniques, for different audiences, to different ends. […] We wouldn't assume Hollywood films represent the full emotional register of filmmaking, and we don't expect every art house film to save the rain forest […] Yet we still talk about games as if they are all the same. We talk about how games could reenergize education, without having a nuanced conversation about which games and why. […]" (Isbister 2017, xv-xvi)

Isbister further argues:

> "To have a rich and meaningful discussion about how games fit into our lives, how they work on us as human beings, we need to get beyond shadowboxing with the monolithic notion of "games," and delve into the elements that make up the game experience in all its facets." (Isbister 2017, xv)

In other words, an at times simplistic notion of digital games as propagated in educational discourse may eschew more nuanced discussions related to particular 'gametexts', their 'quality' as expressive media, and their attendant affordances and constraints. Notably, this discourse is becoming more nuanced within established media and news outlets: In particular, news sites and publications within the anglo-speaking realm, such as *The Guardian, Forbes, The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, The New Yorker, The Atlantic, NPR,* all demonstrate an increasing tendency to review individual games as cultural texts in their own right – i.e. they are reported on and

reviewed similarly to how one would report on and review films, novels and theatrical productions. Additionally, just as there has been a historical tendency to pathologize games, there is an increasing body of work that explores games as therapeutic (e.g. Griffiths 2019) and socially conscientious (see *Games for Change* – a nonprofit dedicated to the increased visibility and dissemination of games for social change). Nevertheless, a previously established, binary discourse surrounding games as positive or negative may continue to impact how actors in formal educational contexts orient themselves towards the medium. A monolithic notion of games can be tied to e.g. misleadingly simplistic depictions of games as generally good (e.g. are motivating) or generally bad (e.g. are addictive) or for generally narrow purposes (e.g. for entertainment, for education). Additionally, when treated as a monolithic category, we may fail to recognize that games, just like any media, can be poorly written, poorly designed, and poorly implemented:

> "Another risk is placing high hopes on games designed for the public good–as many non-profits, health organizations, and social enterprises are doing–without realizing that bad game design can undermine the most noble of ambitions. It's quite possible to make terrible, dull, and unappealing games for learning or training or health. We need to have a language for discerning among these games–are they doing their job well or poorly? How can you tell? What makes them good?" (Isbister 2017, xvii).

Along this vein, I argue that the discipline of TEFL is lacking a nuanced *evaluative discourse* for games in language education. This is not to say that good evaluative criteria have not been proposed for digital games in language education (see Blume et al. 2017; Reinhardt 2019); I would, however, argue that there is room to further develop this discourse in light of the purported agendas and processes of formal secondary language education specific to Germany. Particularly within a sociomaterial paradigm, an evaluative concept should not just consider how games 'fit' into current conceptualizations of language education, but also take into account how games 'push back' on these agendas and processes and encourage new or at least remixed practices. This dissertation has been undertaken with the concern that a more nuanced and robust evaluative discourse for digital games is required lest educators continue to be under-supported in their attempts to design for the medium in their classrooms.

1.2. A sociomaterial paradigm for theoretical research in games-based learning

In approaching the diverse – and at times contestable – discourses surrounding the use of digital (narrative) games in formal EFL education, this dissertation adopts a sociomaterial paradigm for theoretical and conceptual research in TEFL – an outlook which significantly overlaps with approaches such as "posthumanism, feminist materialism, process philosophy, relational ontologies or new materialism" (Toohey 2018, 25) as these have been adopted in fields such as philosophy, culture & gender studies, science & organizational studies, as well as in education. In adopting a sociomaterial view, this dissertation especially draws on science studies and feminist philosopher Karen Barad's construct of *agential realism* (Barad 2007)[13], as well as on the education-specific insights proffered by Kelleen Toohey, Tara Fenwick and Cathy Mills (Toohey 2018; Fenwick 2015; Mills 2016). In the following sections, I will first present my arguments for what a sociomaterial view contributes to engagements with the digital in language education, followed by a more detailed breakdown of the core attributes of the sociomaterial view that have been taken up in this dissertation.

1.2.1. Why a sociomaterial paradigm for digital engagement in TEFL?

Researchers and practitioners in language education have long endeavoured to conceptualize and put into practice the roles that different technologies might most productively and appropriately play in formal educational settings. Within the field of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), many attempts have been made to characterize the roles of computing technologies and of language learning theories and approaches as is appropriate for the digital age. As an early example, in 1998, Mark Warschauer and Deborah Healey conceived of three phases of CALL linked to historically-situated language learning approaches and their contemporary technologies:

1) **behaviouristic CALL**[14] (1950s – 1970s), which developed alongside the computer mainframe and which tasked the computer as "a mechanical tutor" (57) largely for drill-and-practice procedures;

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[13] Within specifications on sociomaterial theory within education, Karen Barad has been associated with both New Materialism (Toohey 2018) and Complexity Theory (Fenwick 2015).

[14] Stephen Bax later argued that behaviouristic or communicative ways of working with technology should not be seen as historically bounded as depicted in Warschauer and Healey's account. As an example, he argued that although the behaviouristic approach was contemporary with the development of the computer mainframe, people would continue to apply behavioristic principles to newer technologies as well. Indeed, many apps specifically created for language learning on mobile devices today are still based on notions of gamified drill-and-practice. Rather than situating the role of technology technology inside of historical approaches in TEFL, Bax proposed alternate categories of closed, open and integrative CALL – the latter of which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8 of this dissertation (see Bax 2003).

2) **communicative CALL** (1970s – 1980s), which developed alongside the personal computer and which was well suited to the provisioning of communicative exercises (e.g. text (re)construction) and in creating interactional opportunities for learners whereas "the focus was not so much on what students did with the machine, but rather what they [did] with each other while working at the computer" (ibid.);
3) **and integrative CALL** (1990s), which developed alongside a growing concern for more socially-situated forms of language use in 'authentic' contexts – including digital contexts – and where learners might "learn to use a variety of technological tools as an ongoing process of language learning and use, rather than visiting the computer lab on a once a week basis for isolated exercises (whether the exercises be behaviouristic or communicative)." (Warschauer & Healey 1998, 58).

Along the vein of – and often in response to – Warschauer and Healey's typology, various proposals for new and remixed typologies have been proposed over time (e.g. Bax 2003; Walker & White 2013), including those which are specific to particular devices or media, such as mobile devices (Pegrum 2014) or digital games (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013; Reinhardt 2019). A tension that underpins these typologies is the degree to which educational practice with technology is seen to be driven by established theories, approaches and methodologies regarding languages and language learning – knowledge which is derived mainly from humanistic inquiry into the cognitive and/or social situation of educational actors – or driven by the affordances and constraints of the technologies themselves. Whether explicitly articulated within these typologies or not, how the relationship between technology and TEFL theory and practice is characterized within the formal and informal curricula and agendas of educating bodies and practitioners is significant. The most cautious approaches towards this tension have tended to downplay the role that the technology itself should play in defining educational practice. Such a position has been argued, for instance, by Dorothy Chun, who has asserted that "technology is not a methodology […] underlying principles of second language acquisition (SLA) must form the basis of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and […] the most critical issue is how technology can best be employed in the service of language teaching and learning" (Chun 2013, xi). In other words, the role of technology in education should be – at most – to *mediate* at the discretion of human intention in the classroom. While such a position is understandable in attempting to protect the discipline from the thrall of technological novelty without conceptual grounding, it fails to consider scenarios where the technological – something which is materially and performatively non-human – has a tangible impact on the boundaries of both what can be

understood about languages and learning as well as on the practices we use to engage with languages and learning – which in turn has implications for how the goals of language education could potentially be articulated. The impact of a theoretical orientation that attributes agency to human actors alone and eclipses the role of the material – especially when confronting particularly disruptive technologies in TEFL, such as narrative and vernacular digital games – is the entrenchment of a conceptual blind spot where certain potentialities of the material in *intra-action* (Barad 2007) with the classroom context and its actors become unreadable. And so it might follow that when digital games are pigeonholed into pre-existing constructs – or are expected to merely mediate the known – and when lesson sequences do not work out as anticipated – i.e. the games were *not* motivating, the learning objectives were *not* met – it is easy to give in to the notion that games must not have very much to do with languages and learning in formal language learning contexts. A sociomaterial perspective, on the other hand, confronts us with our *boundary-making practices* (Barad 2007, 151) and challenges us to consider: What is it about pre-existing constructs (approaches, methodologies, understandings of language use) that are jarring in connection with narrative gameplay and vice versa? In what ways do our boundary-making practices regarding notions of language, language learning, digital culture and play contribute to this tension? In other words, we must consider the degree to which our pre-existing discourses that scaffold engagement with digital games in education are fit for purpose.

In adopting a sociomaterial paradigm for theoretical and conceptual research for game-based learning in TEFL, I will now consider the core functions and attributes of a sociomaterial paradigm which a) facilitate the deconstruction of preconceived ideas about digital games in language education, b) provide an alternate lens through which to identify and design for the potentialities of digital games in education and c) articulate implications for educational practitioners in their engagements with digital games in practice.

1.2.2. Core functions and attributes of a sociomaterial paradigm for language education

a) Deconstructing preconceived notions in education: reconsidering the role of human intentionality and material agency

The deconstructive practices implicated by a sociomaterial view are in alignment with sociomaterialism's de-emphasis on human intentionality and re-emphasis on material agency. This is a potentially radical shift within education as the centrality of people – their attributes, intentions, and interactions – has generally been taken for granted. This centrality of the human

subject has meant that education as a field of study has traditionally resonated quite strongly with humanistic impulses from within both the humanities and social sciences, where the lens of the human subject is key to organizing our understanding and in approaching problems in educational theory and practice – whether this be through the lenses of cognition or social interaction or (some forms of) critical theory.[15] Of the educational approaches that explicitly address materiality in education as a significant factor (e.g. sociocultural approaches à la Vygotzky[16]; ecological approaches à la Van Lier), materiality is still conceived as being somewhat in thrall to human agency and intentionality. For instance, in Vygotzky's exploration into tool usage by learners (i.e. sociocultural theory), a tool is seen to serve "'as the conductor of human influence' on goal-centred activity" (Mills 2016, 114). In other words, tools 'mediate'[17] at the discretion of human intention – as is reminiscent of Dorothy Chun's assertion that "technology is not a methodology" and that "the most critical issue is how technology can best be employed in the service of language teaching and learning" (Chun 2013). Mills argues that sociomateriality "removes the conceptual blinkers that obscure how educational practices are shaped by materials." (Mills 2016, xxiii), thus offering the material (inclusive of the immaterial or the abstract) a more agentic role within educational practice. This does not mean side-lining the 'human' aspect entirely – or making the material superior to human concerns and considerations – but rather involves seeing the 'human' as just one part of the material world: "Socio-material approaches do not position human actors as above the materials, but as among materials" (Mills 2016, 116). The ontological consequences of shifting away from the human as the centre of all meaning making and inquiry are significant in that such a shift destabilizes core taken-for-granted notions of humanistic inquiry. This includes Western philosophical understandings of reality[18], including its most enduring dualisms and hierarchies: e.g. human/non-human, nature/culture, materiality/discursivity (Toohey 2018; see also Barad 2007; Deleuze & Guattari 1987). As argued

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[15] Notably, Pennycook's 2018 contribution on a *Posthuman Applied Linguistics* (Pennycook 2018)

17 Barad in particular takes issue with the notion of material things as 'merely' mediating human activity: "The ubiquitous pronouncements that experience or the material world is "mediated" have offered precious little guidance about how to proceed. The notion of mediation has for too long stood in the way of a more thoroughgoing accounting of the empirical world. The reconceptualization of materiality offered here makes it possible to take the empirical world seriously once again, but this time with the understanding that the objective referent is phenomena, not the seeming "immediately given-ness" of the object world." (152). This concern will be taken up again in Chapter 8 of this dissertation.

[18] "How reality is understood matters. There are risks entailed in putting forward an ontology: making metaphysical assumptions explicit exposes the exclusions on which any given conception of reality is based. But the political potential of deconstructive analysis lies not in simply recognizing the inevitability of exclusions but in insisting on accountability for the particular exclusions that are enacted and in taking up the responsibility to perpetually contest and rework the boundaries." (Barad 2007, 205)

by Toohey: "Materialist accounts invite us to refrain from positing a priori ontological boundaries between material things, such as people, tools, furniture, and so on. Rather, things are becoming in relation with other things, a view often referred to as a relational ontology." (Toohey 2018, 27). In practice, relational inquiry often entails revisiting discourses and practices that have been taken for granted with renewed curiosity. In the previous section, I outlined just some of the taken-for-granted discourses regarding game-based learning that might be revisited – games for entertainment vs. for serious purposes (for education), games as motivating vs. unmotivating, games for formal vs. informal learning. There are additional discourses from within Game Studies that will be addressed later in this dissertation (see Chapter 3.1.), such as the notion of games as tools versus as cultural objects (e.g. Bogost 2015) and games as rule systems versus as narrative media (e.g. Aarseth 1997; Murray 2017a; Ensslin 2014; Juul 2005). However, perhaps more important than the disruption sociomaterial thought might unleash on notions of game studies is the potential for disruption of notions taken for granted in educational theory and practice. For example, the valuing of top-down, backwardly-designed curricula (Richards 2017) as the driving force in our discipline's relationship to 'materials' in the classroom. Within this view of curricular design, first come the competencies from which we derive lesson objectives and from which we ultimately select our activities and materials. Materials in this chain are only useful in so far as they fit into the conditions set by the previously established competencies and objectives – which themselves are derived from humanistic and, as will be unpicked in Chapter 2.2.1., largely pre-digital understandings of languages, textuality and learning. Within such an approach, it is clear how content might be viewed as "the low hanging fruit" of education (see Pegrum 2014, 95) and how materials that are disruptive to this design chain might be rejected out of hand. However, as will be argued repeatedly in this dissertation, the disruptiveness of game media might be regarded as more than just an educational liability – it may also be a part of the appeal of digital game media and how they speak to digital culture compared to other expressive media. Some of this appeal can be outlined as follows:

- games have often extremely varied functionalities and demand to be 'learned' and not just 'read' or 'watched' (Gee 2003);
- games are not designed to be overly 'easy', 'effortless' or 'predictable to use', and if they are these things, then they generally aren't considered to be very well-designed games (Salen & Zimmerman 2004);
- different games can be regarded as their own unique and performatively-realized semiotic domains that are both real and imaginary (Gee 2003; Juul 2005) and that demand both

familiar and remixed literacies which challenge taken-for-granted competencies as these are typically articulated for the language classroom – such as reading, writing, and interaction (Beavis 2022);

- digital games can draw from the semiotic and expressive conventions of all kinds of media and, additionally, possess their own expressive conventions relating to their 'digitality' (Murray 2017a; Bogost 2015);
- games can be regarded as 'possibility spaces' (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 67) – i.e. not just a 'text', but a 'stage' for all kinds of meaningful action – including those actions planned for by designers and those that are co-constituted through players' own imaginations in intra-action the gameworld's affordances and constraints;
- and digital games as black boxes of largely inaccessible code are generally not open to easy adaptation in their basic functionality by human actors who are not a game's designers. However, in thematically, aesthetically and functionally engaging with the 'black boxes' that underly human/digital engagements, narrative digital games also speak to the cultural challenges of digitality (see Stalder 2018; also Chapter 8.2) in uniquely expressive ways.

In other words, treating games as 'tools' that mediate according to human intention – where their potential can only be understood in terms of what we already know about languages, methodology, and the use of materials in TEFL – would require side-lining the disruptive aspects of the medium that are both defining to it and perhaps contain their own set of potentialities for the language classroom.

Treating established curricular designs as open to renegotiation then requires a re-reading of the relationship between materials, curricula, methodologies and what is known about languages and learning with a hope of uncovering meanings that would be overlooked in the usual way of doing things. This is not done with the intention of overturning the TEFL orthodoxy *per se*[19], but rather as a way of "testing out new possibilities and intellectual alternatives" (Anker & Felski 2017, 2). Or, to use Baradian language, it provides an opportunity to re-assess our "boundary-making practices" (Barad 2007, 151) in language education, particularly within the context of the digital transformation of formal education.

[19] TEFL orthodoxy for the purposes of this dissertation: What is taken for granted within top-down discourses on language learning central to the formal, secondary-school context in Bavaria. For example, in curricula (e.g. KMK 2023; KMK 2012b) but also as derived from academic consensus (Richards 2017, 3-5).

b) Identifying the potentialities of digital games in education: Material-discursive entanglement, intra-action and a diffractive methodology

To reiterate, unlike other materials (textbooks, novels, board games, songs), digital games are particularly difficult to directly adapt beyond how the game designers have programmed them; they require specific digital infrastructures to be useable at all; and then demand to be used in particular ways even between game titles. It has often been possible to sideline the material in educational theory, but digital games exert such noticeable force and in ways which usually can not automatically be accommodated by pre-existing scripts we have established for learning with materials and texts in the classroom context. Additionally, the material-discursive resonances and dissonances between how games engage with language and learning and how language and learning is addressed within TEFL is perhaps under-explored and under-defined, particularly for the practitioners who have to navigate this complicated material-discursive situation in the actual classroom context. When considering the problem between promise and practice from a sociomaterial view, this adds up to the fact that the material constraints of vernacular digital games seem to act more strongly than the vaguely-defined affordances currently in popular circulation (i.e. 'games are motivating'). Sociomaterial approaches invite new procedures for reading into the potentialities and constraints of material-discursive entanglements, particularly those that require bridging multiple fields of study.

It is perhaps important to note that other theoretical orientations in TEFL do address this notion of the potentialities – or affordances – of materials and the complex relationships between them. For instance, the ecological approach of Van Lier (which he proposed within a sociocultural framework for language learning[20]).[21] A core contribution of Van Lier's ecological approach is the notion of "affordance"[22]: or the "action potential" of any material, media, or context that "emerges as we interact with the physical and social world." (Van Lier 2004, 92; see also Gibson 1979). In describing the concept of "affordance", Van Lier uses the metaphor of a

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[20] an approach which has subsequently been taken up in the field of ecological CALL (see Blin 2016).

[21] Other approaches worthy of mention but that will not be disentangled further here: complex-systems theory (see Larsen-Freeman 2017) and socio-cultural theory in TEFL (see Lantolf and Thorne 2006).

[22] Notion of affordance as originally proposed by Gibson (1979, 143): "The medium, substances, surfaces, objects, places, and other animals have affordances for a given animal. They offer benefits or injury, life or death. This is why they need to be perceived. The possibilities of the environment and the way of life of the animal go together inseparably. The environment constrains what the animal can do, and the concept of a niche in ecology reflects this fact. Within limits, the human animal can alter the affordances of the environment but is still the creature of his or her situation."

hot stove which allows for several possible actions or inactions: "it can promote culinary activity, conversation on a cold winter evening, warmth for the room, and so on. In terms of inhibiting action, it can burn you, so it inhibits touching" (Van Lier 2004, 5). Whether any of these potentials are exploited ('emerge'), however, depends on who is using the stove, to what purpose, at which particular point in time. Within classroom contexts, desks, whiteboards, and books are full of action potentials that teachers and pupils exploit in different ways at different times.[23] What is critical in this depiction compared to a sociomaterial view is that the potentials that emerge are conducted by human intentionality and agency first and foremost. As argued by Toohey in her comparison of New Materialism and Sociocultural Theory: "SCT retains primary focus on human interactions, with the non-human seen as context and/or mediations for human activity. An SCT perspective investigates how human persons are situated (and often, how they agentially situate themselves) in positions in social/historical/cultural collectives, and how humans use mediations, sometimes physical but also what Vygotsky called 'psychological tools' like language, mathematics, and so on, to accomplish their objectives." (Toohey 2018, 27). Another crucial distinction, as introduced in the previous sub-section, is that sociomaterialism is more likely to deconstruct, question the 'fixedness' of, or approach with 'curiosity' taken-for-granted and entrenched disciplinary notions.[24]

As games are comparatively disruptive and unpredictable as media, inquiry into them is perhaps nicely aligned with sociomaterial perspectives that adopt an ontological orientation rejecting the 'fixedness' of things: "new materialists argue that fixed and essential qualities cannot be attributed to (for example) the animate or the inanimate, or to human persons or non-human things; rather, the claim is that material people, animals, objects, nature, discourses, and so on, proceed (and are becoming together) in relation to and with one another." (Toohey 2018, 28). This notion of things *becoming* in relationship to one another is tied to notions of agency in sociomaterial thought. In navigating the notion of agency, this dissertation relies on Karen Barad's *agential realism* (Barad 2007). Barad argues that agency is not a characteristic of one type of entity over another (human subjects vs. non-human objects; or players vs. gameworld), but

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[23] Affordances, according to Van Lier, do not only relate to material objects, but also to semiotic objects, including linguistic signs (See Van Lier 2004, 95).

[24] For example, Blin's use of an ecological approach to CALL in which he presents a nested taxonomy of affordances (Educational Affordances -> Technological Affordances -> Linguistic Affordances) and relates these to the use of the program *Second Life* in language education (Blin 2016, 49). A sociomaterial view might view such taxonomies with wariness – or would at least ask for a fresh assessment of how the adoption of such a taxonomy impacts the material-discursive situation of what is being studied.

rather a *dynamic* in which different entities act on, among and through one another. In describing agency as an emergent dynamic between different material and discursive entities, Barad introduces the notion of *intra-activity* as opposed to interactivity. Whereas interactivity describes separate entities with generally fixed characteristics coming into contact with one another, Barad's *intra-activity* sees material-discursive entities as both *entangled* and in a process of *becoming* in their relationship to each other. In other words, they are co-constituted and ontologically inseparable.[25] Barad's *agential realism* views it as unrealistic to isolate our attention to single material entities and isolated discourses and instead argues that the smallest ontological unit for consideration is, in fact, phenomena: a collection of material-discursive entities in intra-action of which we take part as material entities in our own right. In terms of the relationship between material and discursive entities, Barad further argues:

> "Material conditions matter, not because they "support" particular discourses that are the actual generative factors in the formation of bodies, but because matter comes to matter through the iterative intra-activity of the world in its becoming. The point is not merely that there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices. The fact that material and discursive constraints and exclusions are intertwined points to the limited validity of analyses that attempt to determine individual effects of material or discursive factors." (Barad 2007, 152)

How then does Barad argue we might go about attending to this mutually constituted version of the material-discursive world? Accordingly, how is an educational researcher or practitioner to identify and respond to the shifting potentialities and constraints involved when digital gameplay is incorporated into the classroom context?

Barad calls for a *diffractive methodology* which involves reading the discourses from different fields *through* one another. Barad describes this as "a transdisciplinary approach that remains rigorously attentive to important details of specialized arguments within a given field, in an effort to foster constructive engagements across (and a reworking of) disciplinary boundaries." (Barad 2007, 25).[26] This involves not just subsuming discourses from another discipline into the pre-

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[25] To quote Barad on this point: "I introduce the term "intra-action" in recognition of ['determinate entities'] ontological inseparability, in contrast to the usual "interaction," which relies on a metaphysics of individualism (in particular, the prior existence of separately determinate entities)." (Barad 2007, 128)

[26] Barad further asserts on this point: "it is crucial that in using a diffractive methodology one is attentive to fine details of different disciplinary approaches. What is needed are respectful engagements with different disciplinary practices, not coarse-grained portrayals that make caricatures of another discipline from some position outside it. My aim in developing a diffractive methodology is to attempt to remain rigorously attentive to important details of

existing hierarchies and notions of another, but rather allowing notions to come into contact, to disrupt, reinforce and perhaps remake one another. In describing this notion of *diffraction* (over, for instance, the related notion of *reflection*) Barad uses the metaphor of ripples in a pond: different material-discursive engagements are like peddles dropped into the pond, causing ripples to spread out, which then intra-act with other ripples caused by other engagements. As these ripples intra-act, the ripples might reinforce each other or cancel each other out. Attending to these intra-actional phenomena then contributes to the reformulation of disciplinary and conceptual boundaries. This dissertation as a theoretical and conceptual offering can be regarded as a *diffractive reading* of the discourses of TEFL and of digital games as digital culture.[27] This involves a consideration of taken-for-granted discourses of TEFL and Game Studies, particularly as relates to how communication, textuality and language learning might be understood in relation to gametexts (Chapter 2). Further diffractive readings of individual gametexts are afforded through a ludonarrative framework for evaluating narrative gametexts for the language classroom (Chapter 3), particularly as diffractively read through the methodological frames of narrative games as task environments (Chapter 4), expressive texts (Chapter 5) and cultural discourse (Chapter 6).

c) Articulating the role of the educational practitioner in a climate of the digital transformation of education: Black boxes of practice and evaluative apparatuses

So far, this depiction of a sociomaterial paradigm for language education has considered how such a view disrupts taken-for-granted approaches to theory and practice and provides a conceptual language for how educational researchers and practitioners might begin to confront this disruption. What has yet to be addressed is how a sociomaterial view positions educators within an 'unfixed' and 'emergent' interpretation of their educational environment.

According to educational researcher Tara Fenwick, sociomateriality encourages educators to engage with "black boxes of practice" (Fenwick 2015). In referring to "black boxes of

specialized arguments within a given field without uncritically endorsing or unconditionally prioritizing one (inter)disciplinary approach over another" (Barad 2007, 93).

[27] Diffractive reading: A diffractive methodology (see Barad 2007) combined with hermeneutic 'readings' that are characteristic of a rather humanities-situated approach to inquiry in education (see Volkmann 2022).

practice", Fenwick draws on the Latourian[28] distinction between 'Matters of Fact' and 'Matters of Concern':

> "Matters of fact are all those things that are assumed to be decided, certain and settled. Like a car that we drive without really knowing how it works, these things are 'black boxes' that are used in practice without critical questioning about how and why they were constructed. Black boxes can be 'facts' but also practices, policies, texts and tools in everyday work. Matters of concern are issues, controversies, uncertainties. But as Latour (2005) contends, most things accepted as settled facts of practice are really matters of concern whose debates have been foreclosed or obscured." (Fenwick 2015, 89).

Fenwick urges a mindset for educators which is attuned to 'matters of concern' in educational practice and through which black boxes of practice are approached with curiosity rather than avoidance. In addressing 'matters of concern', Fenwick encourages educators to "understand 'learning' in terms of recognising their sociomaterial entanglements" by:

- "attending to minor, even mundane, fluctuations and uncanny slips,
- attuning to emerging ideas and action possibilities – the intra-actions of ongoing mattering processes,
- noticing one's own and others' effects on what is emerging,
- tinkering amidst uncertainty, and
- interrupting black boxes of practice to hold open their controversies and disturbances." (Fenwick 2015, 91)

In another depiction of how one might unpick the sociomaterial entanglements of the educational environment, Cathy Mills proposes a 'sociomaterial literacy' for educators and educational researchers in which they "trace the human and non-human elements of meaning making interactions, carefully mapping or untangling complex webs of elements that emerge or play a role in literacy practices." (Mills 2016, 116). Mills outlines the following guiding questions within her notion of *sociomaterial literacy*:

- "What literacy practices take place when particular objects of educational practices are brought together: particular technologies, books, pedagogies, students and policies?
- What kinds of literacy learning can be achieved, and what kinds of teachers and literacy users can be created in the context of these practices?

[28] Bruno Latour is key figure in sociomaterial thought. A Latourian approach has more frequently been taken up in empirical approaches to educational research – i.e. with the implementation of Actor-Network-Theory (see Fenwick 2015; Mills 2016).

- What literacy practices are occurring within a system, and how are these practices formed and held together?" (ibid., 116-117)

What then might the toolkit look like for educators in implementing the mindset espoused by Fenwick and Mills? Defining such a toolkit is difficult because sociomaterialism specifically challenges the usefulness of routines and scripts in educational practice. As described by Toohey:

> "language education research has often been preoccupied with discovering universals: teaching practices that do and don't 'work', ideal orders in which to teach elements of a language's grammatical structures, personality traits of successful and unsuccessful learners, the best social relations for language learning, and so on. A new materialist view would hold that discovering universals can only be done by reducing phenomena to static, dead and determinable things. How might we begin to think of language, learners and learning in material, dynamic, intra-acting, indeterminate and immaterial ways?" (Toohey 2018, 37)

This dissertation approaches this problem through the Baradian notion of *apparatus,* or "material (re)configurings or discursive practices that produce (and are part of) material phenomena in their becoming." (Barad 2007, 184). Within Barad's *agential realism*, apparatuses are a way for practitioners to conceive of their role in being a part of, influencing and being influenced by the larger material-discursive world.[29] Barad, a physicist, illustrates their notion of apparatus with the experimental conditions that have contributed to understandings of the nature of light as both wave-like and particle-like: Both natures can not be measured at the same time, but when a physics practitioner adjusts their equipment – their material apparatus of measurement – then light appears wavelike; adjust it another way and light appears particle-like. Instead of focusing on just the result of the experiments (light is both particle and wave), Barad focuses on the fact that these results are inseparable from the experimental situation, the tools used to realize it, and

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[29] As asserted by Barad: "Human practices are not the only practices that come to matter, but neither is the world (at least as it currently exists) independent of human practices. The question is what role human practices play. In my agential realist account, humans do not merely assemble different apparatuses for satisfying particular knowledge projects; humans are part of the configuration or ongoing reconfiguring of the world— that is, they/we too are phenomena. In other words, humans (like other parts of nature) are of the world, not in the world, and surely not outside of it looking in. Humans are intra-actively (re)constituted as part of the world's becoming. Which is not to say that humans are the mere effect, but neither are they/we the sole cause, of the world's becoming. The particular configuration that an apparatus takes is not an arbitrary construction of our choosing; nor is it the result of causally deterministic power structures. To the degree that laboratory manipulations, observational interventions, concepts, and other human practices have a role to play, it is as part of the material configuration of the world in its intra-active becoming. Human practices are agentive participants in the world's intra-active becoming. Phenomena are sedimented out of the process of the world's ongoing articulation through which part of the world makes itself intelligible to some other part. Therefore we are responsible not only for the knowledge that we seek but, in part, for what exists." (Barad 2007, 206-207)

the experimenter who assembles these apparatuses and *intra-acts* within the experimental situation. In this view, practitioners are accountable for their role in contributing to the 'boundary-making practices' of their disciplines. As emphasized by Barad: "different material-discursive practices produce different material configurings of the world, different difference/diffraction patterns; they do not merely produce different descriptions. Objectivity and agency are bound up with issues of responsibility and accountability. Accountability must be thought of in terms of what matters and what is excluded from mattering." (183-184).
This dissertation is thus concerned with the *evaluative apparatuses* that educators might construct in connection to the use of digital games in the language classroom. Rather than looking to formulate scripted designs, such an approach aims at *heuristics* for engagement with narrative digital games. The framework as presented in Parts II and III of this dissertation are a kind of evaluative apparatus for facilitating a diffractive reading of narrative games through significant methodological frames of TEFL – i.e. narrative games as task environment (Chapter 4), as expressive text (Chapter 5) and as cultural discourse (Chapter 6) – whereas these methodological frames are themselves materializations of TEFL theory ('text', 'task', 'discourse') as these have been formulated through disciplinary discourse and practice. In constructing the evaluative apparatus that is at the heart of this dissertation, the following considerations are involved within the chosen sociomaterial paradigm:

i. Attuning to the assemblage from which an evaluative apparatus is constructed

The notion of *assemblage* as often cited in sociomaterial theory, including in education (see Toohey 2018; Mills 2016), is derived from the philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Assemblages are dynamic and shifting networks of people, things, and thoughts that are interrelated and act on one another. Assemblages are seen to have a rhizomatic arrangement – a non-hierarchical material-discursive network that can be re-negotiated, navigated and re-articulated in an endless number of ways (see also Honan 2004). Here, the notion of assemblage is treated as one way of viewing the material-discursive factors at play when educators evaluate educational phenomena. Understandings of curricular design, pre-existing methodological scripts, differentiated attention to the agendas of education at play, engagement with concrete texts and materials (including games), educational actors and the routines that physically take up space in the classroom environment may all play a role. This view is somewhat resonant with the more popular TPACK model in educational discourse as the reciprocal relationship between an educator's content, pedagogic and technological knowledge:

> "the relationships between content (the actual subject matter that is to be learned and

> taught), pedagogy (the process and practice or methods of teaching and learning), and technology (both commonplace, like chalkboards, and advanced, such as digital computers) are complex and nuanced. Technologies often come with their own imperatives that constrain the content that has to be covered and the nature of possible representations. These decisions have a ripple effect by defining, or in other words, constraining, instructional moves and other pedagogical decisions. So it may be inappropriate to see knowledge of technology as being isolated from knowledge of pedagogy and content." (Mishra and Koehler 2006, 1025)

In a way that is congruent with the notion of assemblage, Punya Mishra and Matthew Koehler describe TPACK as "an emergent form of knowledge that goes beyond knowledge of content, pedagogy, and technology taken individually but rather exists in a dynamic transactional relationship" (Koehler et al. 2014, 102).

ii. In performing a diffractive evaluation of game media, entertaining flat and unfixed relationships within the assemblage

Rhizomatic assemblages are neither hierarchical or pre-structured.[30] For the purposes of education, this might mean suspending notions of e.g. backwards, forwards or process-based curricular design, and flattening top-down and bottom-up influences (this in relation to Jack Richard's depiction of curricula design in language education; further discussion in Chapter 2.2.). This also means allowing material factors (such as digital games) to exist at the level of pre-existing theory and agendas of TEFL. This is a rather performative view: "entanglements are highly specific configurations and it is very hard work building apparatuses to study them, in part because they change with each intra-action." (Barad 2007, 74). Accordingly, even in presenting an evaluative framework for narrative digital games (Chapter 3), this dissertation acknowledges that evaluation is particular to the practitioner and must be responsive to discursive-material entanglements of any particular teaching situation.

iii. Evaluation as a creative process, an act of design

This involves how one's attention to one's own material-discursive understandings contribute to processes of formal and informal evaluation, to instructional design, and to actual

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[30] In relation to Richards' notion of curricular design as Backwards, Forwards, or Process-oriented (Richards 2017; see also Chapter 2.2): Within a Baradian view, perhaps the focus would rather be on the ways in which these orientations of curricular design occur simultaneously and *intra*-act together. This 'flatness' also differs from an ecological view in TEFL/CALL which often relies on *embedded* hierarchies to organize and map interactions between educational factors and actors (e.g. Blin 2016). A 'flat' approach perhaps aligns somewhat with Richard's Process-oriented curricular designs (Richards 2017). See also Eileen Honan's discussion of teachers as curricular bricoleurs (Honan 2004). Honan draws extensively on the philosophies of Deleuze & Guattari – two other figures who are prominent in the literature on sociomaterial theory (see Toohey 2018; Mills 2016).

conduct in the classroom. Within Barad's notion of apparatus, we have to attend to not just how we go about evaluating material-discursive phenomena, but how the evaluation and the evaluator themselves *intra-act* and become *along with* the phenomena under observation. Evaluations in this view are not static or fixed – in evaluating, one is already performing design – and the evaluator is a part of a new staging of educational phenomena: "*apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices —specific material (re)configurings of the world—which come to matter.*" (Barad 2007, 206, emphasis in original). The discourses that frame how we might evaluate a novel gametext matter. As such, such 'evaluative apparatuses' are indivisible from the act of using a game in a classroom context – i.e. if there is a failure in game's usage, one has to interrogate not just that game as a separate entity, but the apparatus that was used to engage with it. As such, within a Baradian view, the evaluator shares accountability with phenomena:

> "Intra-active practices of engagement not only make the world intelligible in specific ways but also foreclose other patterns of mattering. We are accountable for and to not only specific patterns of marks on bodies—that is, the differential patterns of mattering of the world of which we are a part—but also the exclusions that we participate in enacting. Therefore accountability and responsibility must be thought in terms of what matters and what is excluded from mattering." (ibid., 394).

This emphasizes the degree to which the discourses that frame our engagements with digital games matter to classroom practice – and, in particular, how critical a nuanced and robust *evaluative discourse* for digital games is for the field.

1.3. Situating the research: Relevant terminology and the educational context

The goal of this section is two-fold: firstly, to clarify core terminology as derived from the fields of game studies and game-based learning – which situates this research as a contribution to game-based language learning – and secondly, to clarify the educational context for which this contribution has been made.

1.3.1. Within digital game-based language learning (DGBLL): Game-*enhanced* language learning, narrative gametexts and ludonarratives

Game-enhanced language learning & vernacular games

In attempting to shed a monolithic notion of digital gameplay, this dissertation benefits from categories of gameplay in language education that have been established by Sykes & Reinhardt (2013) and Reinhardt (2019). They distinguish between three approaches to digital games in language education as follows:

Game-Based L2TL[31]: using games intentionally designed for L2TL. This is what might be referred to as "gamification" of language educational content (or "the chocolate-covered broccoli" approach).

Game-Informed L2TL*:* Using instructional practices informed by the theoretical principles of play and gameplay. Gamification as method.

Game-Enhanced L2TL: Using vernacular games not originally intended for the L2TL context (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013; Reinhardt 2019).

This dissertation is firmly embedded in the latter approach, whereby:

> "In contrast to game development in the educational technology industry, the vernacular game industry is huge and not focused on their games as learning environments or resources, although it does produce many games that can be used for L2 learning, just as any authentic artifact or media like a news article or film might be used to learn or teach a language. Designers embed narratives into games that can be leveraged as L2 learning resources, and players can learn from the emergent interactions during gameplay, as well as from the attendant discourse practices around gameplay through interaction with gamer communities and their resources." (Reinhardt 2019, 9)

Just like the 'news articles' and 'films' suggested by the Reinhardt citation above, the 'vernacular games' included in this dissertation are understood to be authentic, cultural texts in their own right (i.e. gametexts), and as such, can be approached with "textual thinking" (Paesani 2018).

Gametext

Along this vein of "textual thinking" (Paesani 2018), this dissertation will frequently refer to individual vernacular game titles as 'gametexts'. The term is deemed appropriate in meeting the following considerations:

- Affording a de-emphasis on games as a monolithic category (with assumed shared features) and re-emphasis on particular instances of games with specific functionalities and featuring individual perspectives;

[31] L2TL: Second and foreign language teaching and learning (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013; Reinhardt 2019).

- Deemphasis on games as commercial products and instead an emphasis on games as cultural and expressive media, similar to other cultural and expressive texts that would typically be engaged with within the TEFL context (e.g. film, comics, novels).[32] The emphasis here is on how games are 'read' and the evocative and interpretive responses from these readings that can be taken up in text work in the EFL context (see Chapter 5). This is to act as a counter-point to the view of games as learning machines and/or as digital tools (Gee 2003).
- Resonates with approaches that embrace "textual thinking" in FL education (e.g. Paesani 2018) and resonates with the literacies perspectives for language learning that will feature prominently in this dissertation (see also Chapter 2.2.2.).

Narrative gametexts

This dissertation is especially concerned with narrative genres of vernacular games, where narratives themselves may be seen as important inroads to aesthetic and cultural engagement within language education. Certain narrative trajectories that are popular in digital games, including digital dystopias and – what I am referring to as – 'interface fictions' (or games that take place within an emulated digital device interface, see Chapter 7.2.2.), are additionally relevant to learner lifeworlds and in exploring our entanglements with diverse digital cultures. Focusing on the narrative genre of games has other implications:

- As some argue, the question of genre is at times more appropriate than the question of medium in language education (see Hallet 2018; Kern 2015). In this way, games are grouped by their larger communicative and textual functions. From a language learning perspective, this might allow us to engage meaningfully with diverse media as situated in a particular set of discourse practices. Focusing on a "communicative macrogenre" (Hallet 2018), such as narrative, also gives us a somewhat stable set of questions to ask of different narrative gametexts (e.g. what effects might the interplay of game mechanics and narrative discourse have on how learners 'make meaning' within game media; see Chapter 3) – regardless of how modally and functionally different such games might be.

[32] Notably, within the *Bildungsstandards* for language education, an emphasis on texts such as film, comics, or novels is most obviously secured under the notion of *Text- und Medienkompetenz* (text and media competence) (KMK 2012; KMK 2023). The most recent 2023 *Bildungsstandards* have further delineated a sub-category here of *Literarisch-ästhetische Kompetenz* (literary and aesthetic competence) which offers additional support for this perspective (KMK 2023). See Chapter 2.2.1. for a more detailed consideration of these and other curricular concerns.

- What must be acknowledged here within a Baradian perspective, is that the decision to focus primarily on narrative gametexts is a kind of *agential cut*[33] aiming to avoid drawing even more discordant examples of gameplay and digital textuality into contact with one another (an educational trivia game vs. a platformer vs. an interactive fiction game in the vein of a choose your own adventure novel). This is similarly problematic in a discussion of analogue gameplay (slot machines vs. an improv game vs. *Uno* vs. Snakes and Ladders) When utilized, these games interact with the classroom context in different ways and are leveraged for different purposes. The category of "game" here is simply too broad.
- Narratives are, in any case, a staple of language education as a communicative and textual genre. I am particularly interested in approaching narratives as 'expressive media' – or as media that are authored and/or consumed with aesthetic purpose. Narratives can act as a bridge between different competency areas and sub-strands that feature in TEFL curricula – e.g. as these are leveraged in *Literaturdidaktik, Kulturdidaktik,* but also *Sprachdidaktik.* As will be explored further in Part II of this dissertation, narrative as addressed within these three sub-strands of TEFL offer rich, established methodological traditions that can be drawn from in negotiating an evaluative discourse for narrative digital games in FL education.

Ludonarratives

A variation on the above term that pays special attention to gametexts that are fully realized as both games and as narratives. This dissertation will propose that much of the potential and constraints of such texts for the TEFL context relate to the interplay of ludic and narrative aspects. This will be fully elaborated upon in Part II of this dissertation within the proposed *Ludonarrative Framework for Narrative Digital Games in Language Education* (See Part II).

1.3.2. Within the digital transformation of formal education: The German secondary school context

[33] Agential cut: "Barad (2007) offered the concept of 'agential cuts' as a way to signal that in research (and life) we make boundaries between objects and activities, but that 'cuts' could always be made in other ways. Having made particular cuts, we then design instruments or methodologies to act as apparatuses for enquiry about these objects or activities, and such enquiry can lead to discoveries about real things; however, had the cuts been made in other ways, different, perhaps even contradictory, discoveries can be made that are also real." (Toohey 2018, 32).

In considering narrative digital games in language education, it is important to situate the educational contexts that are at play in this dissertation; namely, formal secondary school classrooms in Germany and, more specifically, in Bavaria.[34] This is important since particular contexts of learning implicate different material-discursive assemblages that these contexts implicate. This includes curricular forces that are typically described as "top-down" (Richards 2017) – including curricula and educational standards, the agendas of social and political bodies that specify trajectories for education, priorities as implemented by the administration of the implicated schools and school systems, as well as particularly well-established discourses on teaching and learning as promulgated by practitioners (e.g. researchers, trainers) who are directly or indirectly involved in the training of educators. Other forces[35] include what the learners bring into the classroom, the general social climate, the values of educators, phenomena that arise in the process of teaching, and the material situation of the classroom. Bringing digital narrative (particularly vernacular) games into the classroom is stimulating for several of these forces in that the introduction of disruptive technologies resonates with a climate of digital transformation of society more generally and of education more specifically. In considering top-down and bottom-up factors that influence the uptake of narrative digital games in education, it is important to note that the processes of digital transformation of education can be described as both a state of affairs – e.g. learners and educators are participants of digital cultures, including game cultures, before they even enter the classroom – as well as a policy priority – e.g. supra-governmental bodies (e.g. EU), governmental ministries (e.g. the German *Kultusministerium,* or ministry of education), school boards, university departments are all invested in developing productive and/or meaningful trajectories for the digital in society and in education. The evaluative apparatus offered here involves a consideration how ones' practice is situated within these forces and who is ultimately served by the uptake of narrative digital games in education.

2. Assembling available designs for teaching and learning with narrative digital games

[34] Important in that it is the Bavarian school curriculum (LehrplanPLUS, see ISB n.d.) that will most extensively be drawn from in this dissertation, including related curricula and curricular frameworks such as the national standards for language learning in Germany (see KMK 2023; KMK 2012b), the CEFR and its companion volumes (COE 2001; COE 2020). See also Chapter 2.2.1.

[35] Forces or "curricular designs" that Richards would refer to as bottom-up or process-oriented (Richards 2017; see also Chapter 2.2.).

As established in Chapter 1.2.2., in designing an evaluative apparatus for working with digital games, one can attend to the assemblage of available designs available to an educator. To reiterate: *Assemblage* is a notion often utilized in sociomaterial approaches as derived from the philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari 1987; see also Toohey 2018). Assemblages are dynamic and shifting networks of people, things, thoughts, processes that are interrelated and act on one another. This chapter proffers an assemblage of 'available designs'[36] as relates to: perspectives and prospects for game-based language learning (Chapter 2.1.); policy, curricular instruments and pedagogies for confronting digital media and digital games in formal language education (Chapter 2.2.); and relational facets of digital games as expressive media (Chapter 2.3.). At the moment – to borrow another notion from Deleuzian philosophical grammar – this assemblage is presented as a rhizomatic arrangement: a non-hierarchical material-discursive landscape of available designs that can be negotiated, navigated and re-articulated in different ways.[37] These designs could be considered background noise that an educator within the German, formal, secondary school context might be exposed to and which they can respond to with varying degrees of intentionality in practice. The designs introduced here establish understandings of curricula, language, language learning, play and gameplay, expressive media and digital textuality that will be taken for granted in the following sections of this dissertation.

2.1. Relevant theories of (game)play and orientations to DGBLL in TEFL

This sub-chapter introduces some of the most relevant tensions in game studies and DGBLL discourse relating to this dissertation. I will address tensions between rule-based and open-ended play and how this relates to the 'possibility space' of digital gameworlds. I will further consider established purposes of play and gameplay in TEFL and introduce relevant consequences of transitioning from analogue to digital play.

2.1.1. Negotiating the fundamentals of (D)GBLL: *Ludus*, *Paida* and Games as 'Possibility Spaces'

[36] Available designs as derived from multiliteracies pedagogy: pre-existing resources for meaning-making that can be leveraged in the making of new meanings (the re-designed) (NLG 1996; Kalantzis et al. 2016). Offered here is an overview of pedagogies and core matters of concern within these pedagogies that are available to TEFL theoreticians and practitioners.

[37] "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other […] A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, social sciences, and social struggles." (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 7).

Games and play have long been leveraged for learning in TEFL practice. This is, in part, unsurprising since 'learning' is frequently associated with 'play' in its role in human development and socialization. In his seminal work *Homo Ludens*, cultural theorist Johan Huizinga argued that play could be considered pre-cultural, as even animals 'play' and, in doing so, learn and hone skills they need for survival (Huizinga 2016, 1; originally published in 1938). Within human cultures perhaps any socializing activity can be learned playfully so long as participants adopt a playful or "gameful" demeanour towards it (Reinhardt 2019, 12).[38] In this way, play and gameplay can be considered intrinsic and ubiquitous to human culture and its processes of socialization – including within the socializing domain of formal education. In considering educational perspectives on play, two of the giants of developmental psychology, Piaget and Vygotsky, both theorized – with differing emphases – on the nature of childhood development and play – especially as regards the shift from imaginative to rule-oriented play. Piaget saw shifting play practices as evidence of children's progression through distinct developmental phases – which involved moving from practice-based/sensorimotor play to symbolic/pretend play and to social/rule-based play (Henricks 2018; Nicolopoulou 2018). In learning the world through play, Piaget characterized children's interactions with their environment as a feature of either *accommodation* or *assimilation*: within *accommodation* children are confronted with their lack of existing strategies or schema for overcoming environmental challenges and learn to adjust their strategies and concepts accordingly, whereas within *assimilation* children can take pleasure in implementing their functioning schema and strategies onto the environment (Henricks 2018, 371). This is perhaps not so dissimilar to the negotiation of meaning that players of a new digital game engage in when, first, they have to discover the constraints and possibilities for action within a new gameworld (*accommodation*) and then become increasingly competent in performing these actions as working within the constraints of the gameworld becomes routine (*assimilation*). When game designers introduce new environments and mechanics later in the game, players can be thrown back into a state of re-orientation which requires a renewed negotiation of mechanics (*accommodation*). This distinction will feature again in distinguishing between narrative and non-narrative play in Chapters 2.3, 3 and 4. Vygotsky took issue with Piaget's rigidly cognitivist

[38] Reinhardt on his term, "gameful": "A gameful disposition is attuned to game elements like rules and narratives or the structured qualities of play forms like competition or simulation in an activity like a conversation, a text, or an L2 learning activity and can therefore leverage them for outcomes and purposes like intentional learning." (Reinhardt 2019, 12).

account of play and argued instead for the "social-relational" nature of play (Nicolopoulo 2018, 192). In this vein, Vygotsky challenged the pure division of pretend play from rule-based play: where Piaget saw the former as a sign of developmental immaturity in comparison to the latter, Vygotsky emphasized how rules are inherent to pretend play as well – even when children are not explicitly cognizant of the ways in which implicit rules (i.e. understandings of the world) underpin their actions and are ultimately negotiated between play partners and objects in the process of play. For Vygotsky, it is this negotiation that contributes both to social competencies and the development of further symbolic understandings (ibid.). As stated by Nicolopoulou, "In this respect, fantasy or pretend play and games with rules can be seen as two poles of a single continuum: from an explicit imaginary situation with implicit rules (pretend play) to an implicit imaginary situation with explicit rules (games with rules)." (ibid., 192).

From outside the field of developmental psychology, this distinction between pretend or open-ended vs. rule-oriented play features prominently in games studies and DGBLL literature. In response to cultural theorist Huizinga's aforementioned seminal treatise on games and culture, Roger Caillois in his *Man, Play and Games* (1958) proposed this distinction be classified as *ludus* (organized, mastery- or rule-oriented play) and *paidia* (impulsive, improvisational or freeform play).[39] Commentators on Caillois's characterization of play have offered that rather than treating *ludus* or *paidia* as separate categories, these may instead be seen as two complementary forces that play off one other (see Jensen 2013). For instance, a freeform activity (*paida*) such as children playing pretend – e.g. 'Let's pretend we're bears' – might eventually be made more structured with explicit rules (*ludus*) – e.g. 'Okay, now that you are a bear, you have to walk on four legs and try to catch the other children.' In the same vein, play activity relating to explicit rules and game objectives might be suspended to make way for more freeform play – e.g. during a game of charades or pantomime where the audience becomes so entertained by the humorous antics of the actor that the audience purposefully stops making guesses to prolong the act, thus sidelining the game goal in favour of more open, humorous play. In terms of the material situation of play, environments and tools that are more likely to inspire *paidia* are playgrounds and toys or, in a

[39] As will be addressed further in Chapter 3.1., definitions of play and gameplay are frequently contested in game studies literature. As addressed by Winther-Lindqvist: "It has proven impossible to create a satisfactory positive consensual definition of what play is […] So, another strategy for capturing the essence of play is to compare it through a contrasting analysis, pointing to similarities and differences between play and other phenomena. Some of the most interesting and widely explored ways forward are analytical comparisons between play vs. work, play vs. ritual, play vs. learning, play vs. drama, play vs. sports, play vs. fighting, play vs. law, play vs. power. Through these contrasting analogies we uncover new aspects or new implications of the variable and fascinating phenomenon of play – yet still without completely capturing it in its entirety." (Winther-Lindqvist 2018, 224).

digital game, sandbox-like worlds where players have significant freedom of action outside of any articulated game goals (e.g. *Minecraft* or *The Sims*); meanwhile, the rule-books and rituals of analogue play, the presence of rule-minded co-participants in play (e.g. the referee on a sports field; the teacher in the classroom; the friend who has played the game many times before and knows the rules very well), the digital code-based constraints that direct action in digital play – all contribute to the fostering and maintenance of *ludus*. As will be discussed throughout this dissertation, this blurred ground between *ludus* and *paida* is a significant concern within digital, vernacular play in the formal language classroom. *Ludus*, of course, is generally favoured in the classroom (particularly for older learners) as the goal-oriented and constraining nature of rule-based play is especially supportive in meeting particular learning objectives. Indeed, many communicative tasks can be approached in a game-like manner (e.g. in an 'information gap task' where learners have to find differences between two pictures where some learners can only look at Picture A while other learners can only look at Picture B, and where learners are asked to describe their pictures and find as many differences as they can in 10 minutes; see also Chapter 4). Rule-based play is appealing for educators in the control they can exert in setting rules, designing materials, and moderating the play situation. In digital games, the constraints and resources of play are, first and foremost, moderated within a closed digital program and are less open to manipulation by e.g. a teacher. Relevant to this point is Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's notion – as introduced in Chapter 1.2.2. – of games as "possibility spaces":

> "Creating a game means designing a structure that will play out in complex and unpredictable ways, a space of possible action that players explore as they take part in your game. What possible actions might players take in the course of a game of Musical Chairs? They might push, shove, tickle, poke, or fight for their seat once the music stops and the mad scramble for chairs begins. The game designer must carefully craft a system of play in which these actions have meaning in support of the play of the game, and do not distract or interrupt its play.
>
> But game designers do not directly design play. They only design the structures and contexts in which play takes place, indirectly shaping the actions of the players. **We call the space of future action implied by a game design the space of possibility. It is the space of all possible actions that might take place in a game, the space of all possible meanings which can emerge from a game design.** […]
>
> The space of possibility springs forth out of the rules and structures created by the game designer. The space of possibility is the field of play where your players will explore and cavort, compete and cooperate, as they travel through the experience of playing your game. **But […] as a game designer you can never directly craft the possible space of your game. You only can indirectly construct the space of possibility, through the rules you design. Game design is an act of faith-in your rules, in your players, in your game itself.**" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 67; emphasis mine)

While this passage refers to the role of game designers, this is appropriate to consider alongside the role of teachers in game-based learning who contribute not only to game designs (e.g. by creating a game from scratch or providing supplementary material) but who also moderate play practices. In a digital game, their ability to alter the rules and resources of play and to moderate what a learner does when manipulating the device that hosts the game is limited. Learners may focus on the objectives set explicitly by the game alongside the learning objectives teachers highlight in relation to the gameplay, but (and this depends somewhat on the expansiveness of the gameworld) the learner can sideline such goal-oriented concerns in pursuit of more open-ended play or as directed by their own implicit or explicit objectives for play. An instructive example of this was observed in a study by de Castell et al. 2017 in which researchers attempted to teach narrative competence through the game *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*. To their frustration, learners consistently got 'side-tracked' from the narrative arc to pursue other game activities, including goals of their own invention – such as trying to 'toss pigs' (by sneaking up on pigs, catching them and throwing them) in unusual ways. The researchers reflect:

> "What participants were engaging in when "pig tossing" was discovering the affordances of the game system. "*Wind Waker*" offered the player a number of possible diversions from its central story and objectives. In building this study, we had fallen into the trap of imagining the 'ideal player': one who would find the most obvious and efficient path through the game, who was already familiar with the major story arcs of the series. Even participants who followed the walkthroughs did not conform to these expectations of play. Problematic assumptions of this kind surely undergird some of the major claims about the educational value of games: claims that pertain to specific highly regulated and pedagogically mediated contexts of play largely undisturbed by outside influences and attractions - and that anticipate particular game-compliant behaviours. Educators considering using commercial games for education need to know, though, how school-based gameplay of this kind actually happens "in the wild", because that, and not the 'goodness' of a game, just might be what principally shapes and constrains what is educationally possible through its means." (de Castell et al. 2017)

This example emphasizes how crucial an understanding of the shifting nature of rule-based and free-form play – a shift which can be seen as a kind of material-discursive tension and, further, as an *expressive* property of digital gameplay – is for working with digital gameworlds. I would challenge that in working with vernacular games, pedagogies should ideally be able to work with the 'possibilty space' of digital games as a *feature* of the medium – as how meaning is creatively negotiated between game and player – rather than treating its diversions solely as an inconvenience that subverts learning potentials as articulated by educators. If the possibility space of a game – particularly a vernacular game not designed for the purposes of language learning – is the space for "**all possible actions** that might take place in a game, the space of **all possible meanings** which can emerge from a game design" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 67;

emphasis mine) then perhaps an essential task of an educator looking to evaluate games for the classroom is exactly that – to attend to games as *action* and as *meaning* (further, as *expressive* action and *expressive* meaning; see Chapter 5). This will be addressed further in Chapter 2.2.2. which considers how a literacies-informed perspective of games as 'semiotic domains' (Gee 2003) can support an exploration of gameworlds as both *action* and as *meaning* (i.e. the *performative* facets of digital play).

2.2.2. Purposes of games in TEFL contexts: From analogue to digital modalities of play

As mentioned in the previous section, classrooms have long embraced rule-based play, particularly where the processes of organized and rule-oriented play can be aligned with TEFL-relevant learning objectives (see Klippel 2016).[40] Accordingly, the forms of play and gameplay that have been leveraged in TEFL classrooms have tended to mirror the approaches and methodologies of TEFL as these have become prominent over time: e.g. "Simon, Says" could be seen as a total-physical-response game; gamified language drills in which learners gain points for performing lexical or grammatical exercises correctly have long fit well within Behavioristic approaches to language learning; game-like information gap tasks which feature problem-solving and communication in working towards a particular goal have typically been put to use within a communicative approach as this is understood within task-based language learning (see also Chapter 4). The shift to digital play requires additional negotiation of the assumptions and routines associated with play and gameplay in TEFL. Nonetheless, many analogue manifestations of play translate well into the digital medium: e.g. using analogue vocabulary flashcards in learning games versus using a digital flashcard app like *Quizlet* which includes drill-like games for practice. In considering how digital games might be leveraged in the classroom, myself and a colleague have previously proffered the following typology for the uses of games in TEFL (see Figure 1):

[40] However, drama-oriented approaches in TEFL might still leverage *paida* over *ludus* in the classroom depending on how tasks are set.

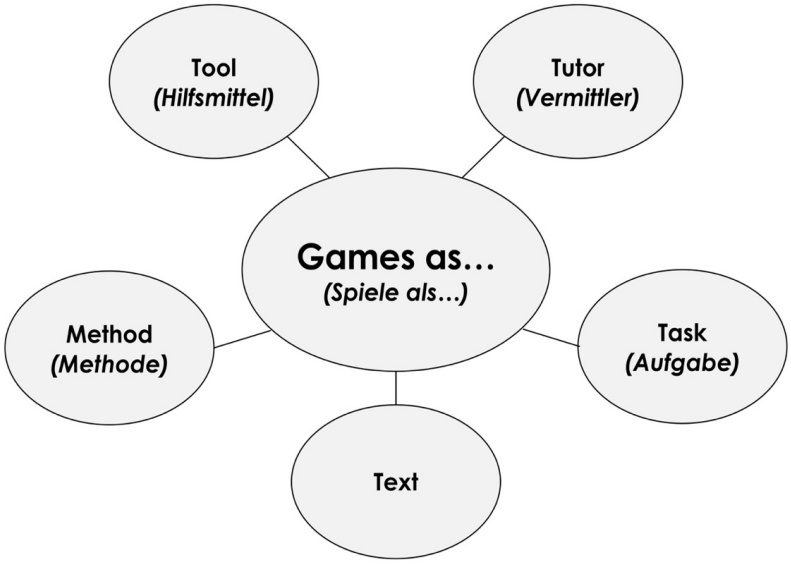

Figure 1: Perspectives for the use of digital games in language education (Stannard & von Blanckenburg 2018, 10)

Games as tool involves educators recruiting game-based materials to fulfill the educator's own purposes. Within an analogue context this might involve robbing board games of their die or hourglasses to create their own games. Such materials do not possess their own goals and objectives – rather the teacher must superimpose their own purposes onto them. In the case of digital games, applications that may be leveraged as tools include digital 'toys' or 'sandboxes'. 'Sandboxes' as a genre of digital play feature only negligible game goals – if at all – and offer players significant freedom of action to pursue their own objectives (e.g. *Minecraft*; *The Sims*; *Elegy for a Dead World;* the sandbox mode on *Scribblenauts*; the story creator mode of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*). To give an example: *Toca Tailor* is a toy-like app available on tablets which allows players to dress up digital characters, much as one would do with paper dolls. *Toca Tailor* could be leveraged in an information-gap task where one person holds a screenshot of a finished outfit design and the other holds the tablet and has to re-create the design based on their partner's instructions. Within this category, we can also attend to how game environments, as well as game editors, can be leveraged as 'authoring tools' for the creation of texts: for example, *Elegy for a Dead World* is a game that largely offers prompts for creative writing; Machinima is a practice in which people record screen recordings of themselves using a video game and its assets (such as in *World of Warcraft* or *The Sims*) and then applying their own scripting and audio to create a (usually) short film (see Luckman & Potanin 2010); *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* offers a story creator mode where users can author their own narratives within the gameworld (other notable game

authoring tools that are relatively accessible for amateur designers include *Twine, Inklewriter, RPG Maker,* and *Visual Novel Maker*; see also Stannard 2018).

Games as tutor is implicated whenever the learning and practice of course content is "gamified" – generally on the level of knowledge recall, rather than of skills. This is perhaps the most common approach in the design of language learning apps where learners drill vocabulary or other structural forms (e.g. *Duolingo*, *Quizlet*).

Games as method involves moving beyond the gamification of subject content (see 'games as tutor') and into the gamification of classroom processes and approaches to teaching and learning. On a somewhat superficial level, this may translate into using systems of competition and rewards in the classroom (i.e. "pointification", see Möbus & Wilden 2016). On a more profound level, Reinhardt and Thorne (2016) have suggested the following principles of game-based learning as a teaching approach: promoting goal-oriented behaviour, providing interactivity on multiple levels, giving feedback that is timely, individualized and instructional, providing meaningful contexts for play and learning, and motivating through engagement (Reinhardt & Thorne 2016). I would additionally proffer that leveraging the discourse practices and roles of digital game cultures in the language classroom could also fall into this category: for example, in having learners take on a game design role and develop their own content (see also Chapter 6.2).

Games as task is involved when goal-oriented processes of play involve communicative activity as this is understood within task-based language learning (TBLL). This has been extensively addressed in DGBLL literature in the case of multiplayer games where games (or game-adjacent platforms, like forums) serve to mediate goal-oriented interactions between players (see Chapter 4). Single-player games can also offer task-like activity when the game itself functions as the partner interlocutor and the player must meaningfully act on problems posed by the game. This aspect is an important one for the purposes of this dissertation (i.e. in the "games as task environment" frame) and will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Games as text is involved where games are regarded as 'texts' that can be treated in the classroom much in the same way as literature, film, images or any other form of media. This category is less commonly seen in analogue gaming as digital games are more likely to leverage

narrative formats, such as film clips.[41] As proffered in our original article proffering this typology, treating games as text may be an appealing approach for the classroom for multiple reasons:

- "Receptive competencies of learners are fostered in a meaningful and situated context (cf. Elsner/Buendgens-Kosten 2016, Gee 2004).
- Considered as texts, games can be utilized as vehicles of cultural expression and can be analyzed, for instance, within perspectives of cultural representation and difference (e.g., gender, class, ethnicity).
- Since games are multimodal and aesthetic text forms, the different mechanisms of meaning creation and shaping can be explored with learners (e.g., the use of language, sound, image, perspective). This can be linked to knowledge from the fields of literature or film.
- A consideration of games as text can be pursued with a wide range of games, from pop-cultural commercial off-the-shelf games to critical or 'serious' game formats that address and negotiate current issues.
- Within this perspective, a game does not necessarily have to be played in class or by the learners themselves. Teachers can use Let's Plays (videos that show someone else playing and commenting on a game) or use screenshots, posters, trailers, and transmedia formats and adaptations (the game, *Papers, Please,* for example, was adapted into a short film)." (translated from Stannard & von Blanckenburg 2018, 10)

As this dissertation is mainly concerned with *narrative* vernacular games in the language classroom, a consideration of 'games as texts' is especially salient – i.e. within the "games as expressive text" and "as cultural discourse" frames – and will be addressed in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6 accordingly.

Many of the above uses for digital games in TEFL are not so dissimilar to the uses that have been found for their analogue counterparts: for example, using toys like *LEGO* for an information gap task versus using a sandbox app like *Toca Tailor*; playing a vocabulary drilling game using physical flashcards versus an app like *Quizlet*; or gamifying classroom processes using

[41] That being said, there has been a backwash effect of digital gaming practices on analogue gaming practices: e.g. Live-Action Escape Rooms (see also Keuchel 2020) or Legacy versions of board games which puts non-narrative games into a story-based framework, e.g. by creating a progression of scenarios where the outcomes of one game often impact subsequent games (see also procedural designs of 'emergence' vs. 'progression' in Chapter 2.3.2.). Tabletop or pen-and-paper RPGs, such as Dungeons & Dragons, are also a notable exception to this rule as they have always been story-driven analogue games whose conventions have also strongly informed the conventions of role playing and adventuring genres of digital play. What this demonstrates is an enduring reciprocal relationship between digital and analogue play practices (see also Kervin et al. 2015 for an interesting case study on the interplay between onscreen and offscreen play involving children playing simultaneously with both *LEGO* and *Minecraft*).

an analogue point system versus through a classroom management app like *Classcraft* (see Jurgeleit 2016). However, the use of 'games as a text' is somewhat unusual within the field of game-based learning as established in the field of TEFL[42], the reasons for which will form the basis of the evaluative framework that features in Part II of this dissertation. In short, digital games can feature all the complexity of non-digital play but with additional facets afforded by the digital medium (see Murray's affordances of digital media, Chapter 2.3.2.). The consequences of which can be as follows:

- Digital games are highly variable multimodal media which can recruit from the semiotic (including narrative) traditions of any other existing media (e.g. literature, film, comics) as well as utilizing conventions specific to play and the digital medium;
- The surprising arrangements of semiotic resources and practices that can be found across different game titles also means that the arrangements of competencies for engaging with games are similarly variable (see "games as semiotic domains" in Chapter 2.2.2.);
- Digital games as black boxes of code make it difficult to know their exact architecture. This 'black box' contributes to the dynamism of games as "possibility spaces" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 67). As a result, all the actions and meanings that might be possible within a game are not guaranteed to be accessible or found within a single playthrough;
- Games as black boxes of code are additionally more difficult to adapt for classroom purposes than analogue games. Rather than making direct adjustments to a game's rules and resources, educators have to negotiate play practices indirectly, for example, through wraparound materials and activities (Reinhardt 2019; see also Chapter 4.3) and creative play/player arrangements (Chapter 4.2.2. and Chapter 5.2.).

Many of these threads will be addressed more extensively in Part II of the dissertation. What follows next is a consideration of how digital, expressive, and gameful media are negotiated within the educational agendas, curricular instruments, and pedagogic perspectives that are most relevant to the formal, secondary school TEFL context that is foundational to this dissertation.

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[42] Exceptions in analogue gaming that include narrative forms might include tabletop or pen-and-paper role playing games and also drama-based interventions in TEFL, which are infrequently seen as a form of Game-Based Learning in TEFL per se and have rather occupied their own niche, but whose properties align with categories of play and gameplay in game studies (e.g. Caillois's game type of *mimicry*; see Caillois 1961).

2.2. Established curricular and pedagogic designs for teaching and learning with digital, aesthetic and/or gameful media

In considering curricular and pedagogical designs for approaching narrative digital games in TEFL, a broad notion of curriculum has been adopted, acknowledging that curricular designs often include more than what is outlined in formalized curricular documents and standards. As characterized by Rose Ylimaki (2013), the notion of curricula might be expanded to include *intended*, *enacted*, *assessed*, *learned* and *hidden* curricula:

> "The *intended* curriculum comprises the content learners are expected to learn, the *enacted* curriculum refers to what learners are actually taught, the *assessed* curriculum refers to the skills and knowledge learners acquire as documented through formative and summative assessments, and the *learned* curriculum is the effects, intended or unintended, of the educational experience. The *hidden* curriculum refers to what is implied to students by what (and who) is included or left out of the curriculum experience" (Graves 2016, 80; see also Ylimaki 2013)

The educator can be involved in orchestrating these variations on curricula to a more or less explicit and conscientious degree. This is relevant to the current discussion in considering the assemblage of factors whose negotiation then contributes to the realization or occlusion of particular curricular and pedagogical designs, such as those relating to the use of narrative digital games (and as this additionally relates to the digital transformation of formal, secondary-school education). Eileen Honan, who has researched teacher engagement with policy texts in her practice, has referred to educators as *bricoleurs* who "assemble meaningful practices from a variety of sources in a considered, thoughtful fashion" and where "The *bricolage* that is assembled in this way forms the teachers' classroom practices" (Honan 2004, 275). Koehler et al. (2011)[43] draw parallels between teaching practice – including engagements with technology – and design: i.e. as much a science as an art, requiring a wide array of knowledge leveraged meaningfully and in creative ways, and involving an iterative process of reflection and re-design within a climate of experimentation and 'play' (Koehler et al. 2011).[44] Within language education, this resonates with the notion of "principled pragmatism" as understood within Bala Kumaravedivelu's Post-

[43] Note that the first two authors of this article (Matthew Koehler and Punya Mishra) are the authors of the TPACK model which is still prominently cited in the literature on digital education (see also Mishra & Koehler 2006).

[44] "design is essentially a dialogue between ideas and world, theory and its application, a concept and its realisation, tools and goals. We see this dialogue as being at the heart of true inquiry, involving as it does the construction of meaning and the evolution of understanding through a dialogic, transactional process." (Koehler et al. 2011, 152).

Method Pedagogy, particularly where methodological openness is paired with reflective practice (Kumaravedivelu 2003, 33).[45] Working within the conviction that few blueprints are currently reliable for the systematic introduction of narrative games in language education, this exploratory orientation towards practice that privileges the teacher's role in negotiating and enacting curricular and pedagogical designs is crucial.

On that note, what influences on teachers' curricular designs will be discussed within this sub-chapter? In his characterization of curricular design in language education, Jack Richards has described both internal and external influences on curricula (Richard 2017): Internal influences relate to understandings of the nature of language, how languages are learned and the social, cultural, professional, critical significance of these understandings for language learners and users (although Richards does not address this last aspect as explicitly), whereas external influences are "more pragmatic and reflects the demand from governments, educational authorities, employers, and language-learning programs that deliver the practical outcomes that stakeholders are seeking" (Richards 2017, 5).[46] The first sub-section below (Chapter 2.2.1.) will consider external influences in the form of intended, formalized curricular instruments, standards and policy guidelines relating to language education – and its intersections with cultural, aesthetic and digital learning – in Europe, Germany and Bavaria. In keeping with the above discussion, these are regarded not as prescriptions for whether games can be deemed worthy of classroom inclusion, but rather as among the resources that can be leveraged by educators in constructing an evaluative apparatus for digital games – and arguably an especially valuable resource in light of the comparative lack of pre-existing materials and scripts for engaging with vernacular games in

[45] In distinguishing between the principled eclecticism (which is often cited with attention to Kumaravedivelu) and principled pragmatism, Kumaravedivelu states: "Unlike eclecticism which is constrained by the conventional concept of method, in the sense that one is supposed to put together practices from different established methods, principled pragmatism is based on the pragmatics of pedagogy where "the relationship between theory and practice, ideas and their actualization, can only be realized within the domain of application, that is, through the immediate activity of teaching" (Widdowson, 1990, p. 30). Principled pragmatism thus focuses on how classroom learning can be shaped and reshaped by teachers as a result of self-observation, self-analysis, and self-evaluation." (Kumaravedivelu 2003, 33)

[46] A couple of caveats regarding Richard's distinction between internal and external influences: Firstly, from a sociomaterial view, Richard's distinction between internal and external influences is perhaps too rigid. On the one hand, academics do end up working for educational authorities and consult on policy, but of course their field-specific contributions can become quite entangled with other influences and become difficult to isolate within the overall discourse of these documents (which frequently occlude the names of those who authored them). Secondly, this distinction is clearly spoken from the perspective of academia and not from the perspective of educators as I do not think educators would necessarily agree that the influences of academic theory on their profession are 'more' internal to their profession than the concerns of the authorities that represent stakeholders' (learners, society generally) interests. Perhaps both external and internal influences can be interpreted as quite top-down unless an educator has integrated these perspectives into their process-oriented curricular designs.

the classroom. In relation to Barad's diffractive methodology as introduced in Chapter 1.2.2., reading formalized standards and curricular documents (as top-down, *intended* curricular designs) and digital games *through* each other can draw attention to how games as expressive, aesthetic, digital media challenge these formalized designs as they are currently articulated. Where there are gaps between what curricula offer and the needs, opportunities and challenges that continue to arise within the digital transformation of society more generally and of education more specifically, there is a necessity to additionally address pedagogies that have been proposed for bridging these gaps. As such, the second sub-chapter (Chapter 2.2.2) will address pedagogical designs that offer further insight into language education and its responses to the digital transformation of education, particularly as involves literacies-informed perspectives in TEFL.

2.2.1. Contending with formal curricular instruments within the digital transformation of formal education: Implications for digital games as expressive and cultural media

The digital transformation of society generally and of education specifically is a pressing policy priority in much of the world but with somewhat unbalanced gains in terms of how the resulting policy and curricula are seen to meet the complexity of these transformation processes (UNESCO 2023). This section will consider the developmental trajectory of formalized curricular instruments (including curricula, standards and policy guidelines) in Europe, Germany and Bavaria as informed by the challenges posed by the digital transformation in society generally and in education specifically. This is done with the purpose of considering what space already exists for narrative digital games in the language classroom as a cultural and expressive form that has come about due to the same digital transformation processes under consideration by these shifting policy orientations. Since this dissertation is situated within the concerns of formal secondary schools in Bavaria, the considered curricular instruments relating to language learning – as well as digital and cultural learning – include those from the Council of Europe, the European Union, and the educational authorities in Germany and Bavaria, as outlined in Table 2: [47]

[47] Bavaria's LehrplanPLUS is regarded as the core curricular document that educators in Bavaria are beholden to. As listed in the table, the earlier guidelines and standards have contributed to the formulation of the LehrplanPLUS. The latter guidelines and standards continue to inform readings of the LehrplanPLUS and would presumably factor into any next generation of curricula that might be released.

Table 2: Overview of relevant curricula and standards, both language-based and those relating to digital education

2001	Europe (COE)[48]	*(CEFR) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*
2003	Germany (KMK)[49]	*Bildungsstandards für die erste Fremdsprache für den Mittleren Schulabschluss*
2012	Germany (KMK)	*Medienbildung in der Schule*
2012	Germany (KMK)	*Bildungsstandards für die fortgeführte Fremdsprache für die Allgemeine Hochschulreife*
2013	EU	*DigComp: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens* (*DigComp 1.0*, 2013; see also *DigComp 2.0,* 2016 and *DigComp 2.1*, 2017)
2017	Bavaria (ISB)[50]	*LehrplanPLUS*
2017	Germany (KMK)	*Bildung in der digitalen Welt: Strategie der Kultusministerkonferenz*
2017	EU	*(DigCompEdu) European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators*
2018/ 2019	EU	*Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*
2018/ 2020	Europe (COE)	*CEFR Companion Volume* (Note: 2018 was the first available Provisional Version that I am aware of)
2021	Germany (KMK)	*Lehren und Lernen in der digitalen Welt: Ergänzung zur Strategie der Kultusministerkonferenz "Bildung in der digitalen Welt"*
2022	Germany (KMK)	*Empfehlung der Kultusministerkonferenz zur Kulturellen Kinder- und Jugendbildung*
2023	Germany (KMK)	*Bildungsstandards für die erste Fremdsprache (Englisch/Französisch) für den Ersten Schulabschluss und den Mittleren Schulabschluss*

Colour Key		
	Europe (EU & COE) Language Learning Curricular Instruments	Europe (EU & COE) Additional Curricular Perspectives
	Germany Language Learning Curricular Instruments	Germany Additional Curricular Perspectives
	Bavaria Language Learning Curricula including Additional Cross-Curricular Perspectives	

The discussion will begin with a consideration of a) the highly influential *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (CEFR) developed by the Council of Europe, b) followed by a consideration of how the CEFR has been negotiated as relates to textual learning within the German educational standards (*Bildungsstandards*) and the Bavarian curriculum (*LehrplanPLUS*), c)

[48] COE: Council of Europe
[49] KMK: Kultusminsterkonferenz
[50] ISB: Staatsinstitut für Schulqualität und Bildungsforschung München

followed by highlights from related policy documents concerning cultural and digital education in Europe and Germany, and finally, d) a brief look at the emerging generation of curricular instruments relating to language learning that have most recently been made available in Europe (i.e. the CEFR Companion Volume) and in Germany (i.e. the 2023 *Bildungsstandards* for modern languages in early secondary school).

a) The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Developed within the auspices of the Council of Europe, the CEFR has been an influential document for language education that has informed educational policy and the curricular designs of several state entities (and commercial ones) both within Europe and globally (see Byram & Parmenter 2012). This includes the German *Bildungsstandards* (i.e. educational standards) as proffered by the *Kultusminsterkonferenz* (i.e. ministry of education), which makes direct reference to the CEFR and its reference scales (KMK 2003, KMK 2012b, KMK 2023; see also Hu 2012). A consideration of the CEFR is considered beneficial due to the ways in which it continues to be reproduced in curricula and teaching practice in Germany, especially in its propagation of both a competency-based and backward-orientation to curricular design, as well as relates to the model of communication that proliferates in the German TEFL context (i.e. the CEFR's interpretation of Communicative Language Teaching, or CLT). In the process of recruiting authentic materials into the language classroom (i.e. vernacular digital games), these designs are relevant in their contribution to the evaluative apparatuses that may be leveraged to determine which materials are ultimately considered suitable for the language classroom. The following discussion will therefore consider the degree to which narrative digital games as cultural, aesthetic and expressive media both fit into and challenge the curricular designs implicated by the CEFR.

The CEFR is a curricular instrument that has been influential within what Richards (2008) has described as the standards movement in education which "promotes the adoption of clear statements of instructional outcomes in educational programs as a way of improving learning outcomes in programs and to provide guidelines for program development, curriculum development, and assessment." (Richards 2008, 172). Proponents of the CEFR have highlighted the role such reference statements play in promoting "lateral coherence" between educational actors across diverse contexts (Piccardo & North 2019, 155). Within the CEFR, this coherence is achieved through the articulation of communicative competences in the form of "can do" descriptors – a proficiency-view of competence that operationalizes language as 'social action' (i.e. as domain- and function-specific communicative outputs) as conducted by language users as 'social agents' (COE 2001, 9-10; Piccardo & North 2019, 149). There has, however, been

concern with the "reification" of CEFR "can do" descriptors when they are taken up as immutable *standards* in educational policy and assessment practices (see Fulcher 2010) versus as reference guidelines open to tempering, re-construction, and concretization via local needs analysis.[51] The implementation of the CEFR's reference scales as standards has proven attractive to large-scale educational bodies concerned with internal accountability and the wide-scale assessability of educational outcomes. However, critics have commented on how these interests can eclipse local educational realities and can functionally suppress educational values and learning processes that are outside of the scope of a particular set of standards and/or that are less 'assessable' (i.e. where that which is most 'assessable' is that which can be assessed at scale with high reliability and some acceptable degree of validity; see Vogt 2018).

In the German educational context, this last criticism has featured strongly from proponents of aesthetic and cultural learning (e.g. Bredella 2003; Delanoy 2007; Hu 2012) where the "aesthetic, affective, creative, moral and cultural dimensions of language and language learning" are feared to be at risk of being sidelined in making way for an "instrumental-functional" view of communication and its more 'assessable' manifestations (Hu 2012, 68). As narrative digital games are being taken up in this dissertation as aesthetic, creative, cultural media, these traditionally humanistic concerns as to the role of formal language education are worth further consideration here. Proponents of the CEFR have argued that when the implementation of the CEFR has occluded other educational values (i.e. the aforementioned "aesthetic, affective, creative, moral and cultural dimensions of language and language learning"; Hu 2012, 68), that this has stemmed from a misreading of the CEFR's intentions. As argued by Byram and Parmenter (2012), the CEFR identifies itself as a *reference* document only (not as a set of immutable standards and not as a fully realized curriculum – although it has nonetheless frequently been leveraged as the core, singular reference document for curricula development, including arguably, in Germany; see Hu 2012) and explicitly argues for the open and local negotiation of its offerings. Byram and Parmenter additionally emphasize the values-based propositions of the CEFR that tend to be occluded when the document is primarily used to formulate standards via its descriptor scales, such as its advocation of plurilingualism and

[51] Richards emphasizes that articulated outcomes within a backward-designed curriculum can be articulated at the institutional level but also at the classroom level (Richards 2017). At the state/institutional level, analysis of needs of the education system on the whole is designed for; at the classroom level, a teacher can also conduct their own needs analysis in formulating/re-formulating objectives suited to the particular context, group of learners and local educational values. The above criticism addresses the aforementioned institution-level implementation of backwards design, and not backwards design as it would be conducted by the educator in their own classroom. Notably, the CEFR itself advocates for the active negotiation of its scales in response to local needs.

linguistic diversity, social cohesion, and the growth of the individual in response to cultural engagement (Byram & Parmenter 2012, 3-4). I would argue that this 'misreading' of the CEFR, whereby the dissemination of the CEFR as a set of descriptor scales has occurred more prominently in educational policy than the uptake of the CEFR's professed values and openness of approach, stems from two tensions in the document: firstly, the comparative actionability of its *backward* vs. *process*-oriented curricular designs (Richards 2017) and, secondly, due to the model of communication that is operationalized within the CEFR's descriptor scales – which is largely acritical and holds an unspecific view of textuality. To address the first point, as proffered by Richards, backward curricular designs start from the performance of a needs analysis, which is then translated into learning outcomes. Other curricular decisions (methods, material, content) are reverse-engineered from this point (Richards 2017). Within a top-down approach to backwardly-designed curricula, an articulation of needs and outcomes is formulated by external authorities to the classroom (e.g. in Germany, the KMK; in Bavaria, the ISB). In contrast, process-based curricular designs draw attention to the role of educators in contributing to the emergent and enacted manifestations of curricula on the basis of e.g. their values and experiential knowledge, TPACK, responsiveness to learners and context, and engagement in reflective and exploratory practice (ibid., 232-237). In contrasting the 'values' asserted by the CEFR in comparison to the descriptor scales, the CEFR's 'can do' statements as a backward design element are eminently actionable; Comparatively, the CEFR's values-based educational propositions (particularly those of the more progressivist, humanist, and/or democratic variety) are unlikely to be met through a competence- and backward-design orientation alone, as these require a privileging of *processes* of engagement – which might involve attention to methodological approach, responsiveness to learners and context, and making principled use of themes, content and toolsets that are likely to facilitate certain processes of engagement – all of which are elements of curricular composition that are sparsely articulated in the CEFR by design (with the exception of an action-orientation, which will be addressed further below; COE 2001, 9-10). Although the CEFR expresses certain values, it also avoids a consideration of what educational processes or 'cultures of practice' must be privileged in operationalizing the values it asserts. In part, this might be to avoid prescribing a way of doing education that could be incommensurate with the diverse societal values and local realities of the broad range of nations and other entities that might make use of the CEFR. In considering the hegemonic influence such prescriptions might have in light of the intended scope of the CEFR, this concern is not entirely unwarranted. However, it does lead to a certain gap in terms of what the CEFR purports its values to be and how this is reflected in its more frequently operationalized view of

communication. The consequence is that where the CEFR is leveraged as the core curricular instrument in formulating new curricular designs, only its view of communication is fully actionable. Values-oriented propositions – including those that privilege "aesthetic, affective, creative, moral and cultural dimensions of language and language learning" (Hu 2012, 68) of which a consideration of narrative digital games as cultural media is a part – would require additional reference points (see Chapter 2.2.2).

I would additionally argue that this gap between purported values and the more actionable descriptor scales offered by the CEFR is further exacerbated in light of the specific model of communication that the descriptor scales assert. This model of communication is worth a closer look since it remains largely unchanged in even the most current German and Bavarian curricula (see KMK 2012b; KMK 2023; ISB 2023) and informs the lens through which narrative digital games might be evaluated as communicative texts. The CEFR can be regarded as a late product of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is often depicted as the predominant approach to language education in large swaths of the globe since the 70s (e.g. Hymes 1972, Halliday 1978; see Duff 2014, Richards & Rodgers 2014, Paesani et al. 2016). At its origins, CLT represented a social and functional turn in its approach to language and language learning – in contrast to the behavioristic, structural, and situational approaches that were formerly dominant (Richards & Rogers 2014). Due to its scope in terms of time and place, CLT has a broad theoretical tradition which has proven friendly to extension by other theoretical dispositions (intercultural communicative competence, e.g. Byram 1997; task-based language learning, e.g. Ellis 2018; content-based instruction, e.g. Cenoz 2015), which in turn has contributed to a broad range of classroom practices that might be considered to fall under the umbrella of CLT (see Richards 2006). As concerns the CEFR, some of the following characteristics are relevant to the current discussion: The approach is broadly considered to be learner-centered in its focus on addressing the pragmatic communicative needs of language users – i.e. concerned with the social functions that communication can fulfill and which allow language users to navigate day-to-day interactions within the various domains in which they make use of the language. A typical assertion of CLT is that communication is learnt *through* communicating (particularly in *strong* manifestations of CLT, such as in task-based language learning) and communicating is facilitated through one's coordination of their communicative competences[52] which involves not just knowledge of forms, but also the ability to leverage skills

[52] For example, Canale & Swain's prominent view of communicative competence (Canale & Swain 1980; 1983), which involves grammatical competences, as well as sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and

and strategies that facilitate a negotiation of meaning (Duff 2014). The CEFR has adopted an "action-orientated approach" that reflects the above concerns: it formulates communicative competence as involving linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic components (COE 2001, 13) and it sees language users (including learners) as social agents who fulfill socially-meaningful tasks through a combination of their communicative and general competences (COE 2001, 9-13).

Unsurprising for an approach that has bridged multiple decades, CLT has been seen to contribute to certain 'excesses' of practice over time – some of which are also attributable to the CEFR. Excesses that are relevant to the current discussion include an overemphasis on oral transactional or interactional communication and a limited role for critical, interpretive and/or experiential textual engagement (see Byrnes 2006; Paesani et al. 2016; Swaffar 2006). Kramsch and Zhang, for example, have referred to how CLT has been leveraged to promote a "Facebook model of communication":

> "In the laudable effort to free L2 learners from having to emulate an elusive native speaker and to help them make the L2 'their own' (Widdowson, 1994), CLT has encouraged them to talk about themselves and their own familiar lives in the L2. That is what they want, that is what they expect to do in language classes, and that is what most foreign language textbooks give them. But in so doing, they are not leaning how to talk about the other or to see things from the eyes of the other. They are just learning to talk about themselves in the company of others who do the same. This is the Facebook model of communication, where everyone participates in a putatively level playing field. But, as Ricento reminds us: *"the view of language as a 'conveyer belt' for the transmission of 'ideas' between interlocutors ignores the fact that hierarchy and inequality are universal features of human society, and that these inequalities are enacted and (re)produced in conversations, interactions, and textual productions and interpretations in virtually all genres of speech and writing, from the smallest unit of informal interpersonal interaction (e.g., a conversation involving persons of unequal social status) to the inequalities rooted in incommensurate ontologies of communication."* (Ricento, 2014, p.354)" (Kramsch & Zhang 2018, 11)

Alastair Pennycook has more succinctly described this as the "empty babble of the communicative language class" (Pennycook 1994, 311; see also Paesani et al. 2016, 8). While the CEFRs articulation of competence as observable communicative action (i.e. the descriptors as 'can do' statements) presents a successful view of language as 'action' (i.e. what learners 'can do' with language as 'social agents'; COE 2001, 9-10; COE 2020, 29-30) – the CEFR remains agnostic in terms of what it 'means' to engage in such action beyond a linguistically-bounded and

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discourse competence. The CEFR makes reference to linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic components of communicative competence (COE 2001, 13).

largely cognitive understanding of meaning. *Relational* meanings, which attend to how communicative action *intra-acts* (Barad 2007) with e.g. texts, contexts, and perhaps conflicting discourses and experiences of cultural belonging that also hold and contribute to meaning, are simply beyond the scope of the model. Similarly, Janet Swaffar has argued that many of the pedagogies that have arisen out of the notion of communicative competence were largely designed to "foster greater ability (competence) to express oneself in a variety of *normative environments*" (Swaffar 2006, 247; emphasis mine) which involves little in the way of scrutinizing attendant "social, political, economic, or cultural implications" (ibid.). The effect is an innately acritical model of communication. As evidence of how this stance is reflected in the CEFR specifically, we can attend to how 'difficulty' in communication is regarded, as illustrated in the following passage of the 2020 CEFR Companion Document: "the distinction 'reception, interaction, production, mediation' actually marks a progression of difficulty" (COE 2020, 33; see also Piccardo & North 2019, 165). This scale of difficulty affirms the view of communicative competence as primarily a linguistically-constrained cognitive process – where what matters is the cognitive effort expended in receiving, formulating and participating in an exchange of messages in the L2 alone, and not on the complexity inherent to the negotiation of meaning that the learner engages in regardless of whether they ultimately articulate these meanings in the target language – something which they may not do either as a function of their L2 competence, of opportunity (e.g. because the classroom activity doesn't allow for this), or as a result of other individual concerns (e.g. "I don't think it is 'safe' to articulate this thought." / "I'm affectively moved here – but not sure I can/want to describe this feeling"). In other words, the CEFR is only concerned with a negotiation of meaning so long as it is *observable* as *communicative action* in the *target language*. Within this view, it is unsurprising that the nuances of textual engagement might be lost – as this negotiation of meaning between text and text user – outside of the most objective aspects of comprehension – is largely unobservable unless tapped into with additional communicative processes and overtly e.g. aesthetic/affective/interpretive/critical objectives of textual engagement. Another concern here is that textualization and textual engagement also implicate additional semiotic resources beyond the L2 alone (including of other languages, but also of other modalities), but the CEFR's descriptors promulgate a contained view of the L2 as the core meaning making system at play in – at least – any 'assessable' act involving an L2 communicative competence. In commenting on the limited potential the CEFRs descriptor scales offer for extended processes of textual engagement – for instance, in the context of literary learning – Eva Burwitz-Melzer has commented on how textual *interpretation* (in comparison to textual understanding or 'objective' comprehension) is only a feature of the

descriptor scales at the C2 level – i.e. the highest, most native-like level of communicative competence (Burwitz-Melzer 2007, 129; see also Table 3 below):

Table 3: CEFR depictions of textual engagement as stated in the descriptor scales (COE 2001; emphasis mine)

Descriptors for Reading in the general self-assessment grid (27)
B2: "I can […] **understand** contemporary literary prose." C1: "I can **understand** long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style." C2: "I can **read with ease** virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works."
Descriptor for Writing Production, Reports and Essays, C2 (62)
"Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, complex reports, articles or essays which present a case, or **give critical appreciation** of proposals or literary works."
Descriptor for Overall Reading Comprehension, C2 (69)
"Can **understand and interpret critically** virtually all forms of the written language including abstract, structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writings."

Relatedly, Werner Delanoy has commented on the CEFR's lack of distinction between experientially distinct approaches to reading, such as *efferent* and *aesthetic* readings, the first of which involves reading in order to take away information from the text, the second of which involves personal involvement with the text and engagement with the experiential qualities of reading (Delanoy 2007, 164; see also Bredella 2003, 46-47). Ultimately, throughout the CEFR texts are treated primarily as *products* of communicative action rather than as potential sites of extended communicative engagement and negotiation of meaning.[53] This is especially apparent in its treatment of literary and aesthetic texts which is considered primarily a feature of "upper secondary and higher education" (COE 2001, 56) and where it is at least implied that literary engagement is more linked to the imparting of declarative knowledge of culture over the development of the learner's whole personality (ibid., 135).[54] This view isn't in keeping with the trends of contemporary literary learning informed by a broadening notion of what texts are worthy of literary consideration (including, e.g. multimodal texts, children's literature), the

[53] As will be addressed below, notably the new CEFR companion document includes new descriptor scales for literary-like engagement with texts – notably within competence of 'mediation'. (See COE 2021, 106-107).

[54] As evidenced in the following statement: "In some cases, the learning of a foreign language aims above all at imparting declarative knowledge to the learner (for example, of the grammar or literature or certain cultural characteristics of the foreign country). In other instances, language learning will be seen as a way for the learner to develop his or her personality (for example greater assurance or self-confidence, greater willingness to speak in a group) or to develop his or her knowledge of how to learn (greater openness to what is new, awareness of otherness, curiosity about the unknown)." (COE 2001, 135)

audiences that make use of them (i.e. younger learners) and the expanded role of the reader in co-constituting textual meanings (i.e. reader-response theory; see Lütge 2018, 178).

Another consequence of the CEFR's taxonomizing of communicative competence as orderly 'can do' descriptors is its promulgation of a modularised view of communicative competence as the practice of essentially individual skills and sub-skills – whereas actual discourse situations may be complex, feature overlapping and difficult to disentangle arrangements of competencies, including an intermingling of symbolic systems for making meaning (e.g. the target L2, but also the L1, other L2s and other modalities, such as image, sound, proximity, etc.). Additionally, in considering the CEFR's handling of *textuality* overall, even the 2020 CEFR Companion Volume acknowledges that the 2001 CEFR document held largely an information-transfer view of textual mediation (see COE 2020, 245). As is evidenced in the following description of textual engagement from the 2001 CEFR document:

> "The output of the process of language production is a text, which once it is uttered or written becomes an artefact carried by a particular medium and independent of its producer. The text then functions as the input to the process of language reception. […] The text is central to any act of linguistic communication, the external, objective link between producer and receiver, whether they are communicating face to face or at a distance. (COE 2001, 97-98)."

In describing the mediating actions of language users toward a text as "meaning-preserving" and "not meaning-preserving", it is additionally clear that meaning is considered "immanent in language" when captured as text rather than "*constituted* through interaction itself" (Kern 2015, 23). In contrast to the view of Kern – whose Relational Pedagogy will be introduced in more detail in the following subchapter:

> "although we use signs, language, and texts to design meanings we want to uniquely express as unique individuals, our agency is mitigated by the fact that those signs, languages, and texts we use inevitably resonate with their own histories and contexts of use, expressing sedimented meanings over which we have no control (or in some cases even any awareness, as is often the case among foreign language learners, for example). Second, our agency may also be mitigated by constraints imposed by the material and technological mediums we have to work with – or by our inadequate knowledge of how best to use them. New media, for example, may foster innovation and creativity in certain respects, but the characteristics of the mediums themselves may also impose important constraints. For instance, Twitter messages are restricted to a maximum length of 140 characters. Facebook profiles are based on a pre-established template. Online search engines are programmed to 'learn' what kinds of information we are most interested in, and then to filter future search results accordingly, essentially narrowing our search results to those consistent with our interests, our beliefs, and our points of view." (Kern 2015, 36)

Arguably, the above aspects are all the more critical in a consideration of the complex textual phenomena and practices inherent to digital media and the navigation of digital cultures (see also Chapter 8).

In light of the above considerations, how do digital games fare when evaluated within this modular, generally acritical, pre-digital, and textually-constrained view of communication? To begin, the prime consideration in curating a game title for the language classroom would be to consider what communicative action in the target language players are likely engage in when playing any particular game. Certain games will fare well within such a view, such as multiplayer games and games featuring robust online communities which feature interactional communication between human players and which resembles communication as it occurs 'in the real world' most closely (e.g. Newgarden & Zheng 2016). Many other games will fare poorly within this view – particularly where it is difficult to disentangle communicative acts in the target language from all the other semiotic action that players must negotiate within their individual playthroughs. The result is that the CEFR can offer only a piecemeal view of digital play – it can only recognise certain acts as communicative and is unlikely to offer a perspective that accommodates the text as a whole (albeit, variable) entity – nor can this view of communication really attend to the negotiation of meaning that takes place between player and these semiotically dense and experientially variable gameworlds. Variability is a key word here in comparing digital games to the largely pre-digital kinds of textuality the original 2001 CEFR document was designed to address. For instance, in contrasting narrative digital gameplay to reading a narrative in a book: within books, the *thematic content* might be considerably variable between titles but the *communicative action* that makes this content comprehensible for the user remains broadly the same (compositional complexity aside). In contrast, within a digital game, the variable modalities, interfaces, control systems of games repel such consistent characterization. This variability is due to both the broad array of semiotic conventions that game designers can draw from (including those drawn from e.g. prose, film, performance, visual art, but also those derived from game-based mechanics and digital affordances; see Chapter 2.3.), but also because games are 'possibility spaces' by design (a notion introduced in the previous sub-chapter) whereas digital games are both *text* and *performance*. Within this view, although a game designer builds a world of possible action – filled with affordances and constraints on action that the player must navigate – the player can act both within and beyond the range of 'designed for' interactions available within the gameworld. In a medium where users are enabled to assert and pursue their own goals for play, to choose the resources they draw on for 'learning the game', and to enact individual playstyles – pedagogic designs that rely on the most predictable practices of communicative

competence will find such media intrinsically challenging. From this view of communication, the complexity and unpredictability of authentic, vernacular game media is most likely to be regarded as a liability, rather than as a site of potential.

A core argument of this dissertation is that digital games should *nonetheless* be approached as sites of potential. As culturally significant media that are tied to the digital transformation processes that are so concerning to educational bodies (see UNESCO 2023; KMK 2021), digital games sit at the crux of the many distinct challenges currently being confronted by formal education (see also Chapter 8). But while their complex and variable communicative, textual and social practices do not fit into neat conceptualizations of time, place and belonging, their narratives nonetheless speak meaningfully to the experience of living in and conversing with a digitally-diverse, interface-laden, and identity-confounding world. In addressing this, what this dissertation ultimately argues for is a *relational* model of communication (Kern 2015) that can function alongside the modular view propagated by e.g. the CEFR. In attending to extended negotiations of meaning that take place in and around digital play, it is further argued that the overall process of engaging with games as aesthetic, expressive, cultural media can foster a surplus of opportunities for communicative action within the target language (and beyond). Treating games as sites of potential requires a view of textuality that goes beyond the purely instrumental, that interrogates media for their aesthetic, affective, expressive, moral and critical facets, and that can accommodate diverse arrangements of semiotic resources that contribute to meaning – particularly where arrangements of semiotic resources are not entirely disentangleable from the presence of the target language.

b) The Bildungsstandards for the learning of other languages of Germany's Kultusministerkonferenz (2003 and 2012) and the Bavarian LehrplanPLUS

The CEFR – particularly its model of communication and its orientation towards backward and competence-driven curricular designs – has significantly impacted curricula in Germany and, subsequently, in Bavaria. As explained by Adelheid Hu, the release of the CEFR coincided with a curricular revision process in Germany that occurred in response to Germany's performance in the 2000 PISA study.[55] As she explains:

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[55] See also Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2001.

> "When the KMK decided on the basis of the PISA results to implement education standards, foreign languages were a special case insofar as a system of levels already existed from the CEFR. Since there were no other empirically based models of competence development in foreign languages, it was not surprising that, under strong political pressure for action, this existing work was taken up without hesitation, and the B1 level used as the basis for the expected level at the end of lower secondary school. Though not intended by its authors as a norm-setting document, the CEFR now acquired, having been transformed into education standards, a high normative significance. The framework curricula provided for the first time in the federal German system for the whole country could be developed in ways specific to each federal state, but the link to the defined areas of competence and above all the levels was nonetheless obligatory. Thus through the coincidence with the results of the PISA study, the CEFR became a central part of a radical reorientation of education policy in Germany." (Hu 2012, 70)

Having established the centrality of the CEFR to curricular designs for foreign languages in Germany, the following discussion of the German *Bildungsstandards* (i.e. the national educational standards) and the Bavarian *LehrplanPLUS* (i.e. the state curriculum) will avoid reiterating aspects that have been addressed in the above discussion of the CEFR and will rather focus on what these curricular instruments *additionally* contribute – particularly in their valuing of textual and aesthetic learning that are not as accommodated for in a CEFR-derived model of communication and textuality. To reiterate, the CEFR was never intended to function as a complete curriculum; in this vein, the following discussion considers how the German *Bildungsstandards* and the Bavarian *LehrplanPLUS* have necessarily concretized, negotiated and expanded upon the CEFR's offerings.

The 2003 *Bildungsstandards* for early secondary school makes clear its adherence to the CEFR and establishes B1 as the level of competence that should be met by the end of early secondary school across all school forms. In terms of how the 2003 *Bildungsstandards* regard aesthetic learning, it largely pursues the same tack as the CEFR in lumping aesthetic texts with other kinds of text in terms of the receptive processes that are engaged. Interestingly, the overall 'valuing' of aesthetic textualities is nonetheless made more explicit in the articulation of the core goals of the *Bildungsstandards*, which states that:

> *"Der Unterricht in der ersten Fremdsprache stellt den Erwerb der angestrebten Kompetenzen fachlich und pädagogisch dadurch sicher, dass […] den Schülerinnen und Schülern mit ausdrücklichem Bezug auf die aktive Teilhabe am gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Leben auch Themen- und Handlungsfelder in ihrer literarischen bzw. ästhetischen/gestalterischen Qualität erfahrbar gemacht werden"* [Teaching in the first foreign language ensures the acquisition of the intended competencies both subject-wise and pedagogically by [...] enabling pupils to actively participate in social and cultural spheres through engagement with thematic areas and activities, including those with literary or aesthetic/creative qualities.] (KMK 2003, 7-8).

Notably, although this goal is stated close to the beginning of the document, it is not further operationalized in the articulated 'can do' statements that follow.

The 2012 *Bildungsstandards* for higher secondary school incorporates an additional competence area that the 2003 one does not: *Text- und Medienkompetenz* [text and media competence] is included as a "*komplexe, integrative Kompetenz*" [a complex, integrated competence] (KMK 2012b, 20). This broadly articulated competence makes room for a broad variety of textual engagement: "*Alle mündlich, schriftlich und medial vermittelten Produkte, die Schülerinnen und Schüler rezipieren, produzieren oder austauschen, werden als "Text" verstanden. Der Medienbegriff umfasst alle Mittel und Verfahren der Informationsverarbeitung und verbreitung.*" [All oral, written and medial products that pupils receive, produce or exchange are understood as "text". The term "media" encompasses all means and methods of information processing and dissemination.] (ibid., 20). It additionally makes reference to culturally specific aspects of texts and "*individuellen Rezeptions- und Produktionsprozesses*" [individual reception and production processes] (ibid., 20). While not referencing literary learning explicitly, room is opened for this interpretation of text work in the TEFL context. Notably, this view of textuality is in line with KMK's recommendations regarding "*Medienbildung in der Schule*" ["Media Education at School"] that was released earlier in the same year (KMK 2012a) and which articulates media education's role in, amongst other things, the "*Ausprägung moralischer Haltungen, ethischer Werte und ästhetischer Urteile*" [the formation of moral attitudes, ethical values and aesthetic judgements] (KMK 2012a, 5).

In comparison to the 2003 and 2012 *Bildungsstandards,* Bavaria's *LehrplanPLUS* is a more fully realized curriculum: it not only offers competencies that are specific to each grade level, but also thematic content that could easily straddle the communicative, intercultural, methodological and text- and media competences that make up *Lehrplan*'s *Kompetenzstrukturmodel* [competence structure model] for the learning of modern languages. Although the 2012 *Bildungsstandards* only explicitly covers the *Gymnasium* level, in the *LehrplanPLUS* the *Text- und Medienkompetenz* category has been incorporated into early secondary school curricula as well. The *Lehrplan* offers additional perspectives relevant to aesthetic learning. In particular, the *Lehrplan* further elucidates an *"erweitertes Textbegriffes"* [an extended notion of text] which includes "*einer großen Bandbreite von auditiven, audiovisuellen, schriftlichen, visuellen und multimedialen Texten*" [a wide range of auditory, audiovisual, written, visual and multimedia texts] (ISB 2023, n.p.). This is a notion that offers significant breadth in terms of what media *could* be brought into the classroom and reflects discussions of media education and literacies-informed perspectives on communication and textual learning as this has surfaced within the wider German literature (e.g. Elsner & Viebrock 2013). The *Lehrplan* includes further references to elements conducive to aesthetic learning,

including the use of fictional texts, and describes purposes of reading in addition to general comprehension, i.e. so as to foster a joy of reading and to support learners in their own creative production of texts: *"Vom ersten Lernjahr an beschäftigen sich die Schülerinnen und Schüler neben Sachtexten auch mit (authentischen) fiktionalen Texten und entwickeln dabei Freude am Lesen und an der kreativen Gestaltung eigener Texte in der Fremdsprache*." (ISB 2023, n.p.).

Another significant contribution of the *LehrplanPLUS* in terms of cultural, aesthetic and medial learning includes the *Lehrplan*'s outlining of thematic areas ("*Themengebiete*") which specify content priorities at each grade level (a closer look at these thematic areas in relation to games will be addressed in Chapter 6). The inclusion of thematic areas offers additional openings for aesthetic engagement with new media and provides some concretization in terms of what creative text types might be taken up within an "*erweitertes Textbegriffes*". For instance, it specifies the following:

> "*Die Lesefreude der Schülerinnen und Schüler soll schon in der Unterstufe durch die Beschäftigung mit poetischen Kurzformen, ersten Lektüren etc. geweckt und der kreative Umgang mit Sprache gefördert werden. Im Laufe der weiteren Lernjahre schulen die Schülerinnen und Schüler ihr ästhetisches Empfindungs- und Urteilsvermögen in der Auseinandersetzung mit vielfältigen fiktionalen Texten. Insgesamt reicht die Bandbreite hier von Liedern über didaktisierte Lektüren und Jugendbücher bis hin zu Gedichten aus verschiedenen Epochen, Dramen, zeitgenössischen Romanen, Spielfilmen und Serien.*" [Pupils' enjoyment of reading should be fostered as soon as the early secondary school by engaging with poetic short forms, first readers, etc. and the creative use of language should be encouraged. In subsequent years of learning, the pupils should hone their aesthetic sensibility and judgement by engaging with a wide range of fictional texts. Overall, the range of texts should extend from songs to didactic readers and young literature to poems from different eras, dramas, contemporary novels, feature films and series.] (ISB 2023, n.p.)

A growing role for aesthetic, creative, multimodal and culturally-sensitive textual engagement can be plotted across these curricular developments. However, digital textual genres do not explicitly feature in the range of media referenced. Where digital media is referred to at all falls largely within the *Lehrplan's* cross-curricular objectives, in particular in the categories of *Medienbildung/Digitale Bildung* [Media/Digital Education] and *Kulturelle Bildung* [Cultural Education]. Within the former, digital media is largely characterized as a "*Hilfsmittel und Informationsquelle*" [tool and source of information] although some reference is made to the "*Medienlandschaft der jeweiligen Zielkulturen*" as follows: "*Sie erlangen einen Einblick in die Ausprägungen der Medienlandschaft der jeweiligen Zielkulturen und reflektieren deren Bedeutung und Einfluss auf die Meinungsbildung.*" [They develop insight into the different manifestations of the media landscape of the respective target cultures and reflect on their significance and influence on the formation

of opinions] (ibid., n.p.). Within the cross-curricular specifications for *Kulturelle Bildung*, the following is stated:

> *"Der Fremdsprachenunterricht leistet einen wichtigen Beitrag zu umfassender kultureller Bildung, da er Kunst und Kultur des jeweiligen Sprachraums zum Thema macht. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler begegnen wichtigen Kulturschaffenden und Werken im Kontext der jeweiligen Zielkultur, schulen ihre ästhetische Wahrnehmung und schätzen die gesellschaftliche Bedeutung kultureller Leistungen."* [Foreign language lessons make an important contribution to comprehensive cultural education by focusing on the Art and Culture of the respective language area. Pupils encounter important cultural figures and works in the context of the respective target culture, train their aesthetic sensibilities and appraise the social significance of cultural endeavours.] (ibid., n.p.).

Within these cross-curricular specifications and the aforementioned 'expanded notion of text' ("*erweitertes Textbegriffs*") theoretical space *can* be made for the treatment of novel textualities, including digital games, as aesthetic, creative and culturally relevant media in the language classroom. However, while this link could be justified within these curricular specifications, this link is not explicitly drawn here. Where digital media is explicitly referenced, it is most frequently treated as a 'tool' and 'source of information' and not as expressive, textual offerings in their own right. I would argue that this presents a rather 'functional' view of digitality (that perhaps pairs well with a 'functional' view of communication) where technologies serve a mediating – rather than a co-constituting – role in meaning making processes.[56] However, as will be seen in the following two sections, a growing concern for and connection between cultural and digital learning will increasingly be addressed in educational policy recommendations concerning digital education.

c) EU and KMK proposals regarding digital and cultural learning

As was exemplified in the above discussion of the *LehrplanPLUS*, language learning curricula for formal contexts can be informed by cross-curricular prioirities – such as relates to the articulation of cultural values (i.e. *Kulturelle Bildung*) and the role that digital media should play in education (i.e. *Medienbildung / Digitale Bildung*). What follows is a closer consideration of EU and German policy guidelines and competence frameworks that implicate both cultural and digital education – with particular attention paid to how the digital can be taken up as a cultural concern for education.

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[56] See Chapter 8.1. for a more extensive discussion of the problem of 'mediation' within a sociomaterial view.

Around the time of the *LehrplanPLUS*'s release, a number of impactful documents were released addressing digitality in education. The EU has had a running project for defining the digital competence of citizens (including the DigComp 1.0 in 2013, the DigComp 2.0 in 2016 and the DigComp 2.1 in 2017) which has spun out into frameworks targeting other groups including – significantly, for our purposes – the DigCompEdu which formulates digital competences for educators. This framework is explicitly competence-orientated, as seen this is also seen in the CEFR (indeed, the DigCompEdu uses the same leveling system as the CEFR; i.e. A1/A2, B1/B2, C1/C2) and offers a rather functional-instrumental view of the digital: i.e. How digital content and tools can be leveraged effectively, sensitively, collaboratively, safely, legally by human actors. Creative use of digital technology is referred to in terms of solving problems that might arise in the use of digital technologies (EU 2017a, 42); aesthetic or experiential aspects are not referred to at all; and any cultural perspective seems situated in a desire for digital practices that support social cohesion within an implicit status quo. The collective exercise of digital competence seems intended to reduce tensions that engagements with the digital can afford while fostering productive innovations (an approach to digital engagement that will be criticized somewhat in Chapter 8.1. of this dissertation).

The KMKs first strategy document concerning digital education was released in 2017 and makes reference to digital competencies as these have been articulated in the DigComp framework from 2013 (KMK 2017, 15-19). It shares much of the instrumental-functional view of the digital that features in the DigComp frameworks but with some attention to culturally relevant practices of textualization that must be paid attention to in light of digitalization. The document notably also cites the KMK's 2012 recommendations on *Medienbildung in der Schule* as still relevant in light of newer digital specifications – thus linking digital education to *Medienbildung*, which according to the 2012 document, involves a concern for cultural-aesthetic education – an affiliation that perhaps tempers a largely instrumental-functional view of the digital as it is seen in other competence frameworks. For example, the 2017 digital strategy guide states the following:

> *"Durch die Digitalisierung entwickelt sich eine neue Kulturtechnik – der kompetente Umgang mit digitalen Medien –, die ihrerseits die traditionellen Kulturtechniken Lesen, Schreiben und Rechnen ergänzt und verändert."* [Through digitalisation, new cultural practices are developing – involving the competent handling of digital media – which in turn expand and change the traditional cultural practices of reading, writing and arithmetic.] (KMK 2017, 13)

The document further emphasizes the need for specification at the level of individual disciplines (i.e. *Fachdidaktik*; see ibid. 12-13). While cultural, aesthetic, and moral aspects of digitalization are

given brief mention, much of the document's specificity is dedicated to infrastructural and legal challenges that must be met at all levels of the school system.

Later competence frameworks and policy guidelines demonstrate a growing sensitivity for cultural aspects and processes of the digital. For instance, the EU's *Key competences for lifelong learning* introduces eight competencies adopted by the EU that are considered "essential to citizens for personal fulfillment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion" (EU 2019, 4). The notion of competence introduced here is largely congruent with that articulated in the CEFR and German standards and curricula as consisting of "knowledge, skills and attitudes" (ibid., 5). An intriguing contribution of this document relates to the competence "Cultural awareness and expression competence" which is defined as follows:

> "Competence in cultural awareness and expression involves having an understanding of and respect for **how ideas and meaning are creatively expressed and communicated in different cultures and through a range of arts and other cultural forms**. It involves being engaged in understanding, developing and expressing one's own ideas and sense of place or role in society in a variety of ways and contexts." (EU 2019, 14; emphasis mine)

The document further specifies:

> "This competence requires knowledge of local, national, regional, European and global **cultures and expressions**, including their languages, heritage and traditions, and cultural products, and an understanding of how these expressions can influence each other as well as the ideas of the individual. **It includes understanding the different ways of communicating ideas between creator, participant and audience** within written, printed and **digital texts**, theatre, film, dance, **games**, art and design, music, rituals, and architecture, as well as **hybrid forms**." (ibid. emphasis mine).

Up until now, this is the only document that refers to digital media and games as expressive, cultural forms in a way that might be congruent with aforementioned concerns for aesthetic (e.g. literary) learning.[57]

The KMK's 2021 document, *Ergänzung zur Strategie der Kultusministerkonferenz "Bildung in der digitalen Welt",* represents a significant turn in centering digitalization as a cultural phenomenon. It references the digital in terms of a cultural shift ("*kuturelle Wandel*") and makes frequent references to a "*Kultur der Digitalität*". The document significantly makes reference to

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[57] Other competences for lifelong learning include: Digital competence; literacy competence; multilingual competence; mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering; personal, social and learning to learn competence; citizenship competence; entrepreneurship competence (EU 2019).

Felix Stalder's book of the same name which depicts a particularly unruly vision of digital culture as a collection of disruptive processes (a vision that will be returned to in Chapter 8 of this dissertation). As much as it references Stalder's notion of a digital cultural condition – the features he mentions are not translated into specific ideas of what this might look like in education. Nonetheless, this is representative of a shift in perspective towards the digital: namely, an acknowledgement that it isn't simply a matter of transposing pre-digital practices into a now digital ecosystem (the digital as a tool, something that mediates at our initiative). Rather, it represents an initiative to confront what Stalder describes as an "escalating crisis for the established forms and institutions of culture, which are poorly equipped to deal with an inundation of new claims to meaning" (Stalder 2018, n.p.). As this dissertation argues, gameful narrative practices definitively take part in these "new claims to meaning" specified by Stalder (see also Chapter 8).

As a final mention, I would draw attention to the KMK's 2022 recommendations for *Kulturellen Kinder- und Jugendbildung* (KMK 2022) which is especially interesting in that it is a perspective that begins with a cultural lens that incorporates digital concerns. In asserting cultural education as a cross-curricular objective, it states:

> "*Ziel ist es, für alle Kinder und Jugendlichen gut erreichbare und vielfältige Angebote der Kulturellen Bildung bereitzuhalten.* […] ***Dabei ist die nach wie vor notwendige deutliche Verbesserung kultureller Teilhabe aller Bevölkerungsgruppen ebenso in den Blick zu nehmen wie die digital geprägte Wirklichkeit der Kinder und Jugendlichen****, die Auseinandersetzung mit dem allgegenwärtigen Klimawandel oder die Förderung des Bewusstseins für den Wert der Demokratie.*" [The aim is to provide easily accessible and diverse cultural educational offerings for all children and young people. [...] **Involved in this is the continued need to significantly improve the cultural participation of all population groups, and which includes a consideration of the digitally shaped reality of children and young people**, their confrontation with the pervasiveness of climate change and the promotion of an awareness of the value of democracy.] (KMK 2022, 9, emphasis mine)

One notable section of the document is dedicated to cultural education and digitality with a concern for the future viability of these developments ("*kulturelle Bildung, Zukunftsfähigkeit und Digitalität"*):

> "*Mit Blick auf die digitalen Lernformate in den Schulen bietet die Kulturelle Bildung sowohl fachlich-inhaltlich als auch auf technischer Ebene umfangreiche, bereits etablierte Formate, Anwendungen und Programme an, die stärker als bisher genutzt werden sollten.* […] ***Diese Formate sollten auch aufgrund ihrer kreativ-mehrdimensionalen Zugangsweisen und ästhetischen Ansprüche bei der Planung zum weiteren Ausbau der digitalen Bildung berücksichtigt werden.***" [With regard to digital learning formats in schools, cultural education offers extensive, already established formats, implementations and programmes, both in terms of subject

> content and on a technical level, which should be used more than before. [...] **These formats should also be taken into account when planning the further expansion of digital education on the basis of their creative, multidimensional potential and aesthetic demands.**] (KMK 2022, 5)

Here it is expressed that digital formats have something to offer education on the basis of their particular creative and aesthetic potential – rather than the more functional-instrumental view of digitality that has been addressed thus far. Also notable is that this acknowledgement of the importance of the digital in cultural learning relies on a discipline-specific perspective of digitality to tease out what such cultural/digital/aesthetic engagement might look like in classroom practice.

d) Curricular re-formulations: The CEFR Companion Volume and the KMK's 2023 Bildungsstandards

Within the context of these shifting discourses of the digital and its relationship to the cultural, two curricular re-formulations for language learning have been released within Europe (i.e. the Council of Europe's companion volume to the CEFR in 2017-2020) and in Germany (i.e. the 2023 *Bildungsstandards* for language education at the early secondary level). I will briefly mention developments in these curricula that are sensitive to the policy shifts considered above.

The COE's Companion Volume to the CEFR originally appeared as a provisional edition in 2017 – with the current, final version having been released in 2020. It explicitly addresses certain criticisms that had been leveraged towards the CEFR concerning creative/aesthetic/literary textual engagement and additionally features some small mention of online communication. This is seen through the following:

- **Inclusion of three new descriptor scales relating to creative text and literature:** Including "reading as a leisure activity", "expressing a personal response to creative texts" and "analysis and criticism of creative texts". Notably, these descriptors fall within an expanded notion of 'mediation' – an expansion that may well play more nicely with the literacies-informed perspectives on language education that follow in the next sub-chapter.
- **Inclusion of descriptor scales for online communication:** Including "online conversation and discussion" and "goal oriented online transactions and collaboration".

In regard to the latter set of descriptors, these are still largely concerned with the digital as a mediational entity that exists between human interlocutors. In this dissertation's examination of

single-player games – where the player is in interaction with the game, rather than with human interlocutors – such a view of human-digital interaction will be challenged (see Chapter 6 and 8). The latter descriptors also introduce the notion of multimodality, whereby "both these scales concern the multimodal activity typical of web use" (COE 2020, 25). What multimodality means for communication in the L2 – where multiple symbol systems interact and are difficult to disentangle from one another in interaction – is not developed further. This offers still a rather narrow perspective on communication and its relationship to digital textuality. An alternate view based on literacy-informed perspectives in TEFL will be discussed further in the next sub-chapter.

This companion document and developments in cultural and digital education within Germany ostensibly contributed to the reformulations that feature in the 2023 *Bildungsstandards* for early secondary school education. Two developments are especially relevant to this discussion:

The first development involves the inclusion of *fremdsprachenspezifische digitale Kompetenz* which is described as follows:

> *"[fremdsprachenspezifische digitale Kompetenz ist] als transversale Kompetenz zu verstehen, die alle Dimensionen des Fremdsprachenlernens bzw. des übergeordneten Lernziels der interkulturellen und mehrsprachigen Diskurskompetenz durchdringt und damit über die fremdsprachliche Text- und Medienkompetenz hinausreicht. Sie betrifft das sprachliche und inhaltliche Lernen in der Fremdsprache ebenso wie die mediale Gestaltung der Kommunikation"* [Foreign language-specific digital competence is] to be understood as a transversal competence that permeates all dimensions of foreign language learning, including the overarching learning goal of intercultural and multilingual discourse competence, and thus extends beyond foreign language text and media competence alone. It concerns linguistic and content-related learning in the foreign language as well as the medial design of communication] (KMK 2023, 25)

This view of digital competence as a transversal competence can also be found in the DigComp and DigCompEdu. Similar to these two documents, the digital is primarily formulated as a mediational tool, or as a "*Werkzeuge für die (fremd)sprachliche Kommunikation und Interaktion*" [Tools for (foreign) language communication and interaction] (ibid.). This tool may impact "*kulturell geprägten Aspekte der Kommunikation*" [culturally-characterised aspects of communication] (ibid., 7) – but includes no mention of the digital as a cultural form in and of itself. The *Bildungsstandards* state that digital competence is often realized through text and media competence, but is unspecific in what this relationship looks like outside of again referencing using digital means for creating new texts.

The second development within the 2023 *Bildungsstandards* that is relevant to this discussion involves the inclusion of *literarisch-ästhetischer Kompetenz* [literary-aesthetic competence],

which is formulated as a sub-category of text and media competence, whereby "*Die literarisch-ästhetische Kompetenz erfährt im Zusammenhang mit dem Fremdsprachenunterricht eine besondere Bedeutung, die sich u.a. aus dem Auftrag des Fremdsprachenunterrichts ergibt, zur kulturellen Bildung beizutragen.*" [Literary-aesthetic competence is of particular importance in the context of foreign language teaching in that it responds to the call for foreign language teaching to contribute to cultural education] (ibid., 22). As with the CEFR Companion Volume's inclusion of a descriptor scale for "expressing a personal response to creative texts", "*Erstverstehen"* [initial response] (ibid., 22) is similarly and newly emphasized here and ostensibly meets the call to include purposes for reading beyond informational comprehension at an earlier level of language use and to re-assert a valuing of cultural (including aesthetic) education as tied to language learning objectives.

In considering the 2020 CEFR Companion Volume and the 2023 *Bildungstandards,* these most current curricular instruments demonstrate a trend towards aesthetic-cultural learning and a cultural view of digital media coming together, but this is not a fully formulated relationship. Even where the connection between digital and cultural concerns is increasingly articulated, there is a paucity of perspectives that view digital media as cultural-aesthetic-expressive artefacts in their own right. The role of digital media in language education is rather a largely a *mediational* one, where the digital functions as a tool to *produce* media or as a space that *mediates* interactions between human actors (see Chapter 8 for a problematization of the notion of digital mediation in language education).

2.2.2. Literacies-informed perspectives on communication, textuality and language learning with digital games

Having looked at established curricular instruments which foreground a largely functional-instrumental view of communication as well as a functional-instrumental (and at times culture-neutral) view of the digital, what follows is a consideration of alternative pedagogies, in particular *literacies-informed* perspectives and their attendant *relational* models of communication that address how meaning making practices – whether on the level of communication, textualization, digitalization and the negotiation of multimodal meaning and cultural discourse – are co-constituted. It is argued that such a view is supportive of looking at games as whole texts, rather than a more modular view which primarily foregrounds the parts of games that clearly qualify as L2-communicative acts in the vein of CLT or of the CEFR. *Literacies-informed perspectives in TEFL* are seen here to be particularly sensitive to material-discursive dimensions of education,

particularly in its engagements with textuality and digitality. I will first offer a breakdown of what is meant by *literacies-informed perspectives in TEFL* within this dissertation:

***Literacies*-informed *perspectives* in TEFL**:

Literacies pedagogies are a broad church, or as argued by Cathy Mills: an "array of tangential or rhizomatic confluences of theory" that may in fact fall under a range of specifications derived from "socio-cultural, socio-spatial and socio-material theories, critical pedagogy, theories of multimodality and social semiotic traditions" (Mills 2016, xix). What many of these islands of theory have as a common starting point is Street's distinction between "autonomous" and "ideological" notions of literacy which represents a shift away from the presumption of a universal and stable set of literacies ('reading, writing, arithmetic') situated in a primarily cognitive and individualistic understandings of learning to a broadening of the notion to accommodate varied and diverse literacies as social and situated practices (Street 1986). The social-turn within literacies perspectives often includes an explicit progressivist stance: For instance, in the example of Multiliteracies Pedagogy where formal education is called "to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities - interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes - students bring to learning" (NLG 1996). As such, the original authors of Multiliteracies Pedagogy – i.e. New London Group – argue: "Curriculum now needs to mesh with different subjectivities, and with their attendant languages, discourses, and registers, and use these as a resource for learning." (NLG 1996). For the purposes of this dissertation, the perspectives on literacy that are most salient include Multiliteracies Pedagogy (New London Group 1996; Kalantzis et al. 2016; Paesani et al. 2016), New Literacies Studies (Lankshear & Knobel 2010; Gee 1990), and Relational Pedagogies (Kern 2015).

Literacies-*informed* perspectives *in TEFL*:

It is important to note that most literacies perspectives named here are not specific to language education (with the exception of Kern 2015) but were proffered as general theories in education (e.g. multiliteracies pedagogy). Nonetheless, these perspectives have perhaps a certain default affinity to TEFL due to shared intellectual traditions rooted in sociolinguistics, sociosemiotics and discourse studies – e.g. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, Kress's multimodal social semiotics and Gee's situated discourse perspective – although multiliteracies pedagogy came to the fore at a time when cognitive, functional and socio-cognitive approaches in SLA were perhaps more dominant (see Larson-Freeman 2017). As such, despite these shared intellectual threads, literacies theories are not automatically in conversation with discourses of what could be

described as the TEFL orthodoxy (e.g. a *Kompetenzorientierung* paired with a communicative approach as understood by the CEFR which is rooted in especially cognitive/functional /sociocognitive perspectives in SLA; see Larsen-Freeman 2017). Rather, theorists in the learning and teaching of languages have had to bridge the insights of literacies perspectives into their fields. Within the German tradition of *Englischdidaktik*, different sub-fields of TEFL (e.g. *Literaturdidaktik, Kulturdidaktik, Mediendidaktik*) have leveraged notions such as multimodality and an "extended notion of text" (Elsner & Viebrock 2013) from Multiliteracies Pedagogy in embracing a broader array of highly multimodal media in formal education, which in itself is part of a thrust to challenge and shake-up traditional textual canons and notions of culture and cultural engagement (see Lütge et al. 2019; Schmidt & Strasser 2018; Hallet 2018, Matz & Wilden 2016). Within collegiate departments of foreign languages in the United States where the bifurcation of functional communication-oriented language courses and cultural-textual courses is especially pronounced (Paesani et al. 2016; Kern 2004; Swaffar 2003), Multiliteracies Pedagogy and related specifications of Multiliteracies Pedagogy, such as Kern's Relational Pedagogy (Kern 2015; Kern 2018), have been proffered as alternatives to the internationalist communicative syllabi which have tended to sideline critical engagements with texts and culture. In both of these contexts, literacies perspectives are not always offered as a replacement to competence-oriented, CLT-derived practices that are well represented in e.g. Bavarian curricula, but have been proposed as a way to soothe some of the 'excesses' of these approaches (see previous sub-chapter), particularly as relates to a broader range of media being taken up in the language classroom, bridging a communicative approach with a more holistic and multimodal view of communication and related language learning competences, and accommodating more differentiated purposes of textual engagement.

In considering literacies-informed perspectives in TEFL, the following notions are most relevant to the current discussion:

a) Re-thinking communication: Meaning making as design, multimodality and ecologies of interaction
b) From multimodality to a consideration of semiotic domains in formal education and in digital games

a) Re-Thinking Communication: Meaning Making as Design, Multimodality and Ecologies of Interaction

The notion of 'meaning making' as design became especially prominent with the New London Group's Pedagogy of Multiliteracies. The New London Group coined the term 'multiliteracies' to emphasize "the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity" which they call on formal education to accommodate (New London Group 1996, 63). In engaging with this multiplicity, two areas are primarily tackled in their view: multiplicity of modalities (multimodality) and multiplicity in terms of social diversity. Multimodality tackles the increasingly multimodal and multichannel ways in which texts can be constructed and used, a view which has become all the more relevant in light of new technologies where "written-linguistic modes of meaning interface with oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns of meaning." (Kalantzis et al. 2016, n.p.). Social diversity, on the other hand, is concerned with the ways in which "Texts vary enormously depending on social context – life experience, subject matter, disciplinary domain, area of employment, specialist knowledge, cultural setting or gender identity" (ibid., n.p.). The New London Group identifies with how learners' own contexts, identities and discursive entanglements impact how texts and discourses – as both familiar and novel multimodal arrangements – are negotiated.

In acknowledging the unique engagements each individual will have with different kinds of text, the New London Group treats "any semiotic activity, including using language to produce or consume texts, as a matter of Design involving three elements: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned." (NLG 1996, 74). Within their notion of Available Designs, a learner 'consumes' a text which involves drawing on their pre-existing meaning-making resources "that take the form of discourses, styles, genres, dialects, and voices, to name a few key variables." (ibid., 75). The designs for one individual will not be the same as for another, and so in engaging with a text alongside their own assemblage of meaning-making resources, the learner is ultimately seen to be engaging in a process of Design which then leads to their own unique Re-Designs – i.e. their own notion of the meaning and meaningfulness of the text that becomes an Available Design in their future engagements with other texts. This articulation of the meaning making process both aligns with and differs from established perspectives on communication in TEFL, such as previously discussed in relation to the CEFR (Chapter 2.2.1.). In terms of what is in alignment: the notion of available designs could be described as the scripts and schemata that are typically depicted in top-down processes of text comprehension within a cognitive view of receptive competence (Saville-Troike 2006, 155). In terms of what is challenged: the notion of

meaning making as design is out of alignment with practices of engaging text comprehension in which objective understandings of a text are more frequently leveraged over more subjective and, indeed, creative interpretations. This also challenges the notion of functional communicative competence as this is often articulated in TEFL curricula in that:

> "listening as well as speaking, and reading as well as writing, are productive activities, forms of Designing. Listeners and readers encounter texts as Available Designs. They also draw upon their experience of other Available Designs as a resource for making new meanings from the texts they encounter. Their listening and reading is itself a production (a Designing) of texts (though texts-for-themselves, not texts-for-others) based on their own interests and life experiences. And their listening and reading in turn transforms the resources they have received in the form of Available Designs into The Redesigned." (NLG 1996, 76).

Cognitive models that are frequently privileged in a consideration of communicative competence acknowledge the role of schema and scripts in comprehension (i.e. whereas schema and scripts can broadly be seen as available designs), but perhaps not the creative utilization of these, particularly where multiple semiotic resources are at play. For example, Gunther Kress (a member of the New London Group whose own theories on multimodality remain influential within the field of social semiotics) put forward the notion of *reading by design* (Kress 2010) where when faced with a multimodal text with diverse multimodal elements, a reader chooses a path through these modes according to their own fancy. Cognitive models that are limited to consideration of the L1, L2 and perhaps paralinguistic aspects of communication are generally not built to accommodate the meshing of modalities outside of human speech and writing, and there is a preference in such models for informational purposes of communication. This is problematic within a consideration of extremely digital, diversely multimodal and generally non-informational media such as digital games. In addressing one cognitive model that does address multimodality, Richard Mayer's cognitive model on multimedia, it is apparent how Mayer's model focuses on how multiple modalities can be coordinated in authored media to create the most efficient meanings possible and includes, for example, recommendations to minimize multimodal contradictions and reinforce synergies between modalities within the composition overall with the intention of minimizing cognitive load (Mayer 2008). This approach makes sense in that his model was tied to the making of educational explainer videos – media with a straightforward utilitarian and functional purpose. However, textual communication that falls outside of these purposes – particularly where aesthetic readings are prioritized – isn't always about communicative *efficiency,* but rather about engaging in experiential and expressive aspects of textual engagement, including evocative and interpretive aspects (Delanoy 2015). If the purposes

of engagement are expressive, it would not necessarily be poor design to give the user a multimodal playground to navigate according to their own fancy.

Kern's Relational Pedagogy is interesting in that it takes many of the central concerns of multiliteracies pedagogy and considers these from within the perspective of language education. His definition of literacy for the purposes of language education in comparison to the notion of communication as it is typically understood within CLT is considered especially convincing for the purposes of this dissertation:

> "Textual communication always relies on some form of material technology. Literacy is the know-how people need to deal with that technological mediation—not only the know-how to produce texts, but also the know-how to interpret them. The language teaching profession typically uses the terms "reading skills" and "writing skills" to talk about these abilities. I prefer to use the term "literacy" because it is more holistic and less oriented toward discrete skills. Literacy allows for a more unified discussion of relationships between readers, writers, texts, culture, and language learning. **Literacy frames reading and writing as complementary dimensions of textual communication—and so we are led to focus on their *interrelatedness* rather than on their separateness as distinct skills. Literacy also highlights the importance of socialization and social practices, which are often less visible when reading and writing are treated primarily as internal, cognitive processes. Finally, literacy also lends itself to today's digital technologies that afford the possibility of creating texts that are not just linguistic but that integrate images, graphic layout design, color, font variation, and sometimes audio and video. These technologies of *textualization* are not easily assimilated under the rubric of "writing," and they require interpretative skills that extend beyond those of "reading."** Although texts have never been purely linguistic in nature, they have never had as wide a range of potential forms as they have today—which is one reason why people often talk about *literacies* in the plural." (Kern 2015, 2; emphasis mine)

Of particular note here is the movement away from communication as a primarily *individual* competence consisting of internal cognitive processes (albeit, that are leveraged for social purposes), and into a view that emphasizes the co-constitutedness of communication – between interlocutors but also involving further social, discursive and material co-actants that are entangled with meaning making practices.[58] In this vein, Kern refers to acts of communication as "*ecologies of interaction* that integrate linguistic, social, situational, and material dimensions of meaning making." (Kern 2015, 23). In exploring this notion further for the purposes of this

[58] Kern further specifies: "From a design perspective, we are co-collaborators with the material and symbolic resources we use. When we communicate we usually do not have an idea and then look around for a medium with which to express it. Rather, the medium is generally part and parcel with the idea itself. That is why serious consideration of media must be part of any theory and practice of communication, learning, and teaching." (Kern 2015, 36)

dissertation, Gee's notion of digital games as *semiotic domains* is considered especially productive, as will be discussed in the next point.

b) From games as 'multimodal texts' to games as 'semiotic domains'

It should be noted that digital games as highly multimodal media challenge more than just relied upon understandings of *communication* – understandings of *textualization* are similarly contested. This is apparent within a consideration of Kramsch and Anderson's five fundamental traits of textualization (as also cited in Kern 2015):

1. "It realigns reality along new axes of space and time.
2. It stabilizes an event or discourse by making it an artifact, identifiable as 'the same' each time it is read or played.
3. It dissociates the meaning of an event from both the participants' and the author's intentions.
4. It extends the importance of an event beyond its original context.
5. It makes the meaning of the event accessible to multiple foreseen and unforeseen audiences." (Kramsch and Anderson 1995, 34; see also Kern 2015, 28;)

Most of these points hold within a consideration of digital games, except notably as relates to point two, where a text is regarded as an artifact that is "identifiable as 'the same' each time it is read or played." (ibid.). For digital games, this is both true and not true. Espen Aarseth in his consideration of *ergogic literature* – literature that requires substantial effort to navigate, a category to which digital games typically belong – distinguishes between two textual layers in such texts: the textonic and the scriptonic (Aarseth 1997, 62). The textonic layer refers to the text as a whole which for a digital game includes the largely inaccessible procedural script (referred to earlier in this dissertation as 'a black box of code') that makes a game function as a digital program. This largely invisible textonic layer is the version of the text that remains 'the same' no matter who plays it. However, the visible scriptonic layer – the version of the text that the user ultimately experiences as an arrangement of multimodal resources (a gameworld, with images, print text, sound; as well as tactile engagement with a controller that allows a player to act on this multimodal playscape in particular ways) – can be variable across playthroughs. This gap between the visible scriptonic and invisible textonic layers is what affords the effort that users of such

texts must expend in order to navigate them.[59] Christopher Bode and Rainer Dietrich, in their comparable exploration of 'future narratives', make a similar distinction between the overall textual *architecture* of texts (the textonic layer), the *runs* that each text-user discursively and emergently co-creates within this architecture and the *protocol* which is the textual journey as it is retrospectively understood (the scriptonic layer) (Bode & Dietrich 2013, 20 and 61; see also Domsch 2013; Meifert-Menhard 2013). It is for this reason that the notion of multimodality is perhaps insufficient in a consideration of digital games since multimodality generally only accounts for textual meaning as this is immediately available to the senses – as sound, image, tactile engagement with the game's controls and language as it may be spoken or embedded in print. Rather, one must also attend to the 'digital affordances' of the medium (Murray 2012; see also Chapter 2.3.2.) which account for the textonic layer – or the invisible architecture that affords interaction between the player and the gameworld.

At issue isn't only the variability of playthroughs in a treatment of games as texts, but also variability between games as individual titles. To illustrate this point, we can compare the communicative acts involved in the reading of different novels versus in the playing of different narrative games. If I read three different novels over the span of some weeks, the content depicted in each novel can be extremely varied, but the (communicative) acts I use to access this content remains generally the same: I open up the book, read the printed text from left to right and from top to bottom, perhaps with some amount of flipping back and forth to check for understanding, until I hit the last page and close the book. If I play three different digital games, both the content *and* the (communicative) acts that I conduct in progressing through each game can be vastly different. The game can have any arrangement of modalities, drawing from many different semiotic traditions (e.g. novels, films, comics) as well as novel semiotic arrangements afforded by the digitality of the medium (see also Chapter 2.3). Whereas with a novel, I know that in order to move forward I have to flip pages, with a game, the buttons I push (on different kinds of devices no less) can lead to different kinds of actions that need to be coordinated for moving forward. Figuring this out involves a process of trial and error and drawing on previous experiences with playing game media. Indeed, this initial phase of orientating oneself within a gameworld is often a large part of the aesthetic appeal of games for avid gamers – this intense negotiation of meaning that takes place upon first entering a new gameworld, the thrill of figuring out how everything works and what one's actions *mean* within this gameworld. James

[59] A 'gap' that is useful to exploit in viewing digital games as task environments – where Ellis 2018 identifies 'gaps' as what creates authentic communicative need in task design. See Chapter 4 for a full discussion on this point.

Paul Gee, also drawing on the distinction between book reading and game playing, refers to this interaction between player and gameworld as a kind of communication:

> "Plato in the Phaedrus famously pointed out that people cannot have conversations with books and paintings because when you ask them something or speak to them, they will not respond. They will not take their turn at talk. Certain forms of media today, however, will respond.
>
> In a video game, when a player does something – and the player most certainly must design his or her action with respect for the game and its rules if the player wants to succeed – the game will answer back and let the player know how the game has "received" his or her "turn". This is a new form of "conversation" (reciprocally-designed communicative turn-taking)." (Gee 2016, 151).

In considering how the variability of digital games challenges notions of textuality, it is understood here that this variability is a characteristic of the 'performative nature' of digital play, whereby games are not just a text (e.g a 'script') but also the 'stage' in which users take on a role and act emergently in the gameworld as 'possibility space' (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 67; see also Chapter 2.1.1.). Early game theorist, Johan Huizinga, famously referred to this performative space as the 'magic circle':

> "The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart." (Huizinga 2016, 10)

The notion of multimodality alone is insufficient in negotiating this 'magic circle' in which the textual as well as the performative dynamic between player and procedural game script must be negotiated. Gee's notion of 'semiotic domain' is seen to be especially supportive in addressing the performative dimension of gameplay alongside notions such as multimodality. Gee has written extensively on digital games through the lens of literacy in education (see Gee 2003; 2004; 2016). Notably, he was one of the co-authors of Multiliteracies Pedagogy as authored by the New London Group, although his own contributions to the broader field of New Literacy Studies predates his participation in the New London Group (see Gee 1990).[60] Within his notion of digital games as semiotic domains, Gee focuses the conversation on the socially-negotiated sets of practices that make use of various multimodal and discursive resources:

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[60] One of the distinctions between Multiliteracies Pedagogy and the New Literacy Studies is that Multiliteracies Pedagogy was proffered explicitly in relation to formal education. New Literacies Studies is a broader field (indeed, Multiliteracies Pedagogy can be said to fall under this umbrella) that additionally and intensively studies and theorizes *informal* literacy practices outside of formal school contexts.

> "By a semiotic domain I mean any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings. Here are some examples of semiotic domains: cellular biology, postmodern literary criticism, first-person-shooter video games, high-fashion advertisements, Roman Catholic theology, modernist painting, mid-wifery, rap music, wine connoisseurship—through a nearly endless, motley, and ever-changing list." (Gee 2003, 18)

To draw on language from another socio-semiotician, Rick Iedema refers to the specific meanings that become accessible to individuals as they become immersed within a particular domain as a process of *resemiotization* (Iedema 2003; see also Pennycook 2018, 40). For the avid gamer, undergoing a process of resemiotization in new gameworlds – engaging in the intense phase of negotiating meaning within a new semiotic domain – can be part of the aesthetic appeal of gaming. What makes digital games as a semiotic domain so fascinating for Gee is the learning principles that games leverage to make 'learning the domain' so desirable to the gamer.

Significantly, Gee writes how digital games as semiotic domains are not all that different than the semiotic domains of formal education. For Gee, formal education is largely a process of initiating learners into particular, socially-valued secondary discourses (as opposed to lifeworld discourses, or discourses of the 'everyday') (Gee 2004; Gee 2015). Within this view, a chemistry class is not just about communicating *content* from the discipline of chemistry, but learners are asked to approximate the role of being a chemist, which includes a constellation of practices and engagement with attendant textualities (designing and implementing experiments, drawing from pre-existing literature in the field, writing up a lab report, orally presenting findings e.g. at a conference). This, of course, is not so different from the competence orientation that features in contemporary curricula where competencies are delineated as subject-specific practices as this is translated into subject-specific skills, knowledge, and the attitudes/values/affiliations that give these practice meaning for participants.[61] In considering how games function similarly to school subjects as semiotic domains, Gee compares formal education to the world of *Pokemon* (Gee 2004, 15). Players of the *Pokemon* card game or digital games have plenty of specialist knowledge: they know that there are a vast number of *Pokemon* with different skill sets and evolutions. In

[61] What makes language education unique in this respect is that – in comparison to the sciences which Gee speaks about extensively in comparing games to formal education where there is a fairly internationally stable academic domain that these subjects prepare learners for – the number of possible domains that learners could be prepared for using an additional language are endless. The agnostisism towards some forms of meaning that communicative competence was accused of in the last subchapter is perhaps a feature of it trying to remain 'domain neutral' – so that it is applicable to as many potential domains as possible. Culturally-derived domains for language education will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

order to play the *Pokemon* games, players make use of the specialist language and knowledge relating to the *Pokemon* universe, such as the features and stats that characterize each *Pokemon* and how these will influence *Pokemon* training, breeding or battles with another *Pokemon*. Players may additionally engage with the larger transmedial universe of *Pokemon* (e.g. TV series and films), where *Pokemon* have different back stories and where these storylines may reinforce *Pokemon* characteristics, player preferences and battle strategies that translate well into the gameworld of a *Pokemon* game. This is not just a significant amount of information, it is information that players engage with dynamically and involves a range of discourse practices: players discuss *Pokemon* with other players and enthusiasts, trade stories and *Pokemon* (as cards/virtual assets/toys), and look up information in "Pokedexes" (an encyclopaedia of *Pokémon* characteristics that exists in the games, as well as in online versions and apps) in order to plan how they will acquire, train, breed and battle their *Pokemon*. Since the mid-90's, *Pokemon* as a semiotic domain has featured prominently in the lifeworlds of young and old gamers alike and has proven quite resilient as the franchise has continued to grow and permeate multiple platforms and new generations of players (Regan 2023). In his consideration of how games are especially 'learnful' semiotic domains, Gee outlines thirty-six learning principles that are typically leveraged by games, such as *Pokemon*, which facilitate players in becoming proficient in the domain of the game. While these are too exhaustive to list here in full, a sampling of these principles alongside the case of *Pokemon* is offered here:

- **Achievement Principle:** "For learners of all levels of skill there are intrinsic rewards from the beginning, customized to each learner's level, effort, and growing mastery and signalling the learner's ongoing achievements." (Gee 2003, 223). As seen in the digital *Pokemon* games: Successfully catching increasingly powerful *Pokemon* and growing one's Pokedex, evolving one's *Pokemon*, training and battling *Pokemon* to earn Gym Badges following increasingly difficult boss battles.
- **Practice Principle:** "Learners get lots and lots of practice in a context where the practice is not boring (i.e., in a virtual world that is compelling to learners on their own terms and where the learners experience ongoing success). They spend lots of time on task." (ibid.) Players battle many Pokemon for different purposes (to catch them, train them or to progress through the game's story). Players get better and better at battling as a result of all this practice.
- **Probing Principle:** "Learning is a cycle of probing the world (doing something); reflecting in and on this action and, on this basis, forming a hypothesis; reprobing the

> world to test this hypothesis; and then accepting and rethinking the hypothesis." (ibid.). Players navigate a virtual world filled with towns and environments for catching different kinds of *Pokemon*. By exploring this world, learners discover which *Pokemon* are available in the different areas, find their way to the next part of the story and the next boss battle. Players may encounter roadblocks (e.g. a difficult boss battle that needs to be beat or an obstacle on the road that can only be removed with a particular skill) and players must problem solve and engage with the gameworld to find a way past these obstacles.

To conclude, to whatever degree one may or may not value *Pokemon* as a semiotic domain, the learning principles leveraged by its media do not just invite learners to appreciate a new semiotic domain from a distance, but to take ownership of it – the process of which may involve multiple discourse practices (which we could also refer to as literacies practices or competencies – or ways of deriving and creating meaning through various modes and media). Gee argues that there is something to be learned from the design principles in games that facilitate engagement with new semiotic domains, regardless of whether the semiotic domains and literacies practices found in certain vernacular games align with those privileged in formal education.[62] Nonetheless, many vernacular games could indeed invite learners into semiotic domains that are relevant to formal language education. And, indeed, it is not just the semiotic domains themselves that may be of interest to the EFL classroom (i.e. in the case of a game which thematizes issues of e.g. cultural identity; see Chapter 6), but the attendant practices that allow players to negotiate this domain (i.e. through navigating dialogue trees; scanning and evaluating different multimodal texts both inside and outside of the game; communicating with 'communities of practice' or 'affinity groups' on social media (Gee 2003) in order to perform better or engage more deeply with the game).

Gee further distinguishes between an internal and external view of semiotic domains. Within a chemistry class, an internal view involves a negotiation of content, whereas an external view relates to the social practices that negotiate/create this content (and the negotiation of identity and social affiliations that participating in such practices affords, for example, within particular affinity groups[63]). To return to our example of reading novels – An internal view of reading novels attends to content and structure (e.g. what is the story and how does the narrative

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[62] His argument is not necessarily that vernacular games should be used in schools, but that schooling should find ways – through digital games or not – to leverage the good learning principles that are leveraged in well-designed digital games. (Gee 2003)

[63] Affinity groups: The group of people associated with a semiotic domain. (Gee 2003, 27)

discourse impact my experience of the story). The communicative acts involved in reading a novel are largely stable. An external view would attend to the domains in which reading a novel might occur and the kinds of practices that one performs with/around a novel inside that domain – if one reads within the lifeworld domain (as an everyday practice, for pleasure) then one might read the book and simply put it away, spend time contemplating the events or worldview of the book with their own worldview and set of experiences, or perhaps they may go so far as to orally recommend the book to social contacts in conversation or review it through the comment section of the digital storefront it was purchased from. If one reads within the domain of literary criticism, reviews might adhere to the conventions of specific genres and modalities of review (e.g. an academic article, a print review for a newspaper, a video essay); If one reads within the domain of film production, practices might involve adaptation of the narrative into another medial form (i.e. film). Gee notes the reciprocal relationship between internal and external domains – reading for pleasure vs. reading for the purposes of reviewing the text vs. reading with the intention to adapt the text informs how content is negotiated – and, indeed, the language classroom often formulates tasks within these perspectives in order to emphasize content in particular ways and/or to afford the practice of further (e.g. communicative) competencies that are involved in these varied practices. In looking at digital games as semiotic domains, the external view is not that different from working with any other kind of media in that there are various domain and role-specific practices that might inform/involve a particular game (although there are practices that are also specific to digital game cultures: e.g. one might review a game, create a *Let's Play*, create fan fiction, create memes, and one might participate in game-specific online communities; see Chapter 6.2.). However, I would argue that the internal view of specific game titles as semiotic domains requires more detailed attention for the purposes of language education.[64] This is due to the fact that *content* in games is negotiated through extremely variable practices (i.e. player action) that are specific to the multimodal and digital affordances of each individually authored gameworld: e.g. Within an interactive fiction game, players' receptive engagements with the story leads to them having to make choices that will determine how the story continues; within a platformer, one 'talks' to the gameworld by mashing the buttons at the correct time in response to different stimuli that one

[64] For Gee, an internal view of semiotic domains for games involves particular game genres as, for example, a shooter will involve similar content and playful practices (Gee 2003, 19). In accommodating the genre-bending and blending nature of many of the games described within this dissertation (see Juul 2019), the view of digital games as *internal* semiotic domains is restricted to individual game titles (i.e. the semiotic domain of a particular gameworld) for the duration of this dissertation.

sees on the screen; within an action RPG, the player might whack enemies with swords, talk to NPCs, explore varied game environments, loot, craft, and configure their character within the means available. What should be clear from these descriptions is that the extremely variable competencies (communicative in the traditional sense, but also other literacies) can be involved across different game titles. Some of these competencies are more immediately meaningful within the context of the language classroom, but all of these actions are meaningful in the sense that the player and gameworld are involved in conversation with one another. In terms of how the negotiation of meaning afforded through play relates to meaningfulness as classroom practices: According to Gee, being 'literate' in a game as a semiotic domain relates not just to navigation of content inside a game (internal design grammars), but also being able to take this up within social practices surrounding a game (external design grammars) (Gee 2003, 30-31). For classroom purposes, we are similarly not just interested in what occurs between player and game as a closed system, but how this internal negotiation of meaning extends into classroom practice. The three methodological frames which will be explored in this dissertation in relation to games – narrative games as task environments (Chapter 4); narrative games as expressive text (Chapter 5); narrative games as cultural discourse (Chapter 6) – implicate not just how games are regarded as content, but also the classroom practices that are implicated in making use of this content within these varied frames. Since internal and external designs are "reciprocal" (29) – this exploration involves a consideration not only of how established practices implied within these frames impact game media, but also how these practices are informed by the games as well whereas "the internal and external grammars and designs of semiotic domains interrelate with each other, mutually supporting and transforming each other." (ibid., 33).

Beyond the degree to which meaning negotiation in the semiotic domain of a game either resembles 'real-world' communication or at least affords 'real-world' communication in the 'real world' domains that surround the game, the ability of learners to slip into and out of different domains can be formulated as a kind of social capital that is especially valued in a digital culture (see also Blume 2019). As stated by Gee:

> "People need to be literate in a great variety of different semiotic domains. If these domains involve print, people often need the print bits, of course. However, the vast majority of domains involve semiotic (symbolic, representational) resources besides print and some don't involve print as a resource at all. Furthermore, and more important, people need to be able to learn to be literate in new semiotic domains throughout their lives. If our modern, global, high-tech, and science-driven world does anything, it certainly gives rise to new semiotic domains and transforms old ones at an ever faster rate." (Gee 2003, 19)

In language education, the flexibility of our learners to slip into different domains is perhaps especially important. Whereas a chemistry class is preparing learners for a fairly stable, internationally recognizable academic domain – language education is unique in that the number of possible domains where learners might make use of an additional language are endless. One might additionally argue that the processes of *resemiotization* that players engage in in slipping in and out of different gameworlds is relevant to *digital cultural* practices on the whole (see also Chapter 8.2 for further discussion on this point).

The ways in which games encourage forms of communication that are perhaps unlike communication in the real world can have another benefit: In recruiting players to negotiate gameworlds as unique realms of meaning with unique semiotic arrangements, games can afford engagement with surprising constellations of competencies. Learners are further empowered to take ownership of identifying their needs in negotiating a new gameworld – including game external practices (e.g. looking for help online) – which involves further arrangements of competence that bridge into real-world communicative practices as traditionally understood in TEFL. This strength, of course, also represents a challenge: Since games can afford unique negotiations of meaning, separate games need to be evaluated individually, and not just for content (like with a book) but for the particular constellation of practices that learners will have to or could possibly engage in in connection to that particular game. Two things that can be supportive in addressing this challenge: 1) attention to how *learner roles* are formulated in relation to games as semiotic domains and how these roles implicate practice (this will be addressed extensively through the three methodological frames that make up Chapter 4-6 of this dissertation) and 2) developing a *relational view* of game media that can attend to how game practices overlap with and differ from other medial practices. This relational view will be addressed further in the following subchapter:

2.3. Negotiating the semiotic hybridity of digital game media: relational, additive and expressive dimensions

As established in the previous sub-chapter, digital games can be regarded as medial hybrids with different games functioning at times quite differently from one another as separate semiotic domains. This sub-chapter will consider approaches to media that can attend to this hybridity in theory and in practice. One such approach is Richard Kern's relational pedagogy which was proposed as a response to the ever-shifting medial landscape that is characteristic of the digital

transformation of society.[65] Kern argues that the best educators can do in such a climate is "to expose learners to as broad a range of purposes, contexts, modes, and mediums of language use as we can—while focusing on fundamental principles that underlay language, literacy, and communication—to help learners see relationships across modes of expression and to foster a critical perspective that will prepare them to understand and shape whatever future practices develop with technologies that have yet to be invented." (Kern 2018, 5). To this effect, Kern has offered a series of relational principles alongside a set of heuristic questions and pedagogic practices:

Table 4: Principles, pedagogic goals and heuristic questions of a Relational Pedagogy (Kern 2015 and 2018)

Pedagogical Goals	Heuristic Questions
Principle 1: Meanings are situated and relational	
Develop learners' awareness of how reframing and recontextualization affect meaning.	What are the contexts relevant to the interpretation of this text (e.g., material, situational, social, historical, ideological etc.)? How might the text and context inform one another? How does this text allude to, contest, build on other texts, even in other mediums?
Principle 2: Language, literacy, and communication rely on both convention and invention	
Show learners the fundamental importance of social conventions in discourse, but also how people adapt conventions, resources, and designs for their individual and collective purposes.	How have conventional semiotic resources been appropriated, adapted, or recontextualized for individual or collective purposes in this text? To what effect?
Principle 3: The medium matters	
Encourage learners to reflect on how language forms are conventionally constrained by material contexts, and how they change over time. Familiarize them with historical precedents that have helped shape the communication technologies they use. Develop their ability to analyze mediums critically for ideological or commercial underpinnings.	How does the text's medium affect language form? Are words written/spoken differently? Is syntax modified? Is text length affected? Are cohesion and coherence devices the same and if so, are they used in the same ways? How do such differences affect listening, reading and writing? How could the meanings expressed in this medium be expressed/re-mediated in a different medium? (to achieve a similar or a different effect)
Principle 4: Texts and communication are always multimodal	

[65] Earlier theories on computer-assisted language learning have proposed that computational practices would eventually normalize and require less deliberate attention from educators over time (e.g. Bax 2003; Bax 2011). As will be addressed further in Chapter 8.2, this normalization of digital technologies has not entirely been realized, with certain arguments suggesting this will never come to pass.

Encourage learners to reflect on how linguistic and non-linguistic elements interact in texts, as well as in face-to-face communication.	How do linguistic elements interact with nonlinguistic textual design elements to produce particular meanings? How are time (e.g., rhythm, timing) and space (e.g., visual layout, movement) used to create particular meanings or effects? What communicative acts (e.g., establishing rapport, sharing ideas, persuading, negotiating, expressing feelings) are facilitated or rendered more difficult by the medium? What are the social consequences (in terms of who is included or excluded, how participant interactions might be reconfigured, how cultural processes and products might be affected) of using one medium and technology versus another?
Principle 5: Language, technologies, and texts mediate between the social and the individual; between ourselves and real and imagined worlds.	
Develop learners' awareness of this mediation and the consequences it can have for understanding. Get learners to think about how in the process of making texts they create social identities.	How does our use of language, technologies, and texts affect how we think about, produce, and use knowledge? How are traces of the communicator's identity or persona signified? How do aesthetic qualities contribute to meaning? Whose interests are at stake, and how are those interests identifiable? Are beliefs, attitudes, myths, and assumptions marked as such or can they be mistaken for facts?

Digital games as media that mirror the shifting semiotic landscape of digital cultures present a significant challenge to practice, but relational pedagogical practices can perhaps help to negotiate these shifts. The language Kern uses in his pedagogical goals and heuristic questions refers frequently to 'raising learners' awareness' and on processes of 'reflection'. Notably, Kern is writing from the perspective of collegiate language education where the capacity of learners to discuss such notions at a conceptual level is perhaps more developed than at earlier levels of education. This approach is perhaps not fully representative of the diversity of practices that might be leveraged in affording these desired processes of awareness and reflection, where much can potentially be gained by drawing on methodologies from subfields of TEFL that include a more activity or task-centered view for working with expressive media – including task-based learning, literary learning, filmic learning, discourse approaches and so on. If a digital game is especially filmic, then perhaps methodology for working with film could be useful, if a game is especially visual, then methodology for working with images would be suitable, if a game makes use of literary genres, then perhaps literary pedagogy has something to offer. This will largely be addressed in the three methodological frames for evaluating and designing for ludonarratives as task environments, expressive texts and cultural discourse in Chapters 4-6. What is considered

useful now is to establish the degree to which game media "rely on both convention and invention" (Kern 2015; see table above) in drawing from both established semiotic practices and affordances specific to the digital medium. Relatable within this perspective is Murray's distinction between additive versus expressive conventions of digital media (Murray 2017a, originally published in 1997; also Murray 2012). Murray – writing in the 90's and looking ahead to when digital media might have more codified conventions for expression – claimed that a less mature or 'additive medium' would rely on conventions established by older media formats, whereas a mature medium would utilize the specific affordances of the medium to expressive purpose and possess its own increasingly stable set of expressive devices and conventions over time. Digital games might be considered true medial hybrids which continue to both borrow and innovate within the specific constraints of the digital medium. What follows here is a brief consideration of a) additive dimensions, in terms of the pre-existing semiotic conventions that are identifiable in game media and b) expressive dimensions which address the uniquely expressive affordances of the digital medium as these are leveraged in game media.

2.3.1. Additive dimensions: Digital games and related expressive media in TEFL

What has been established so far is that games are often both highly and variably multimodal and that this multimodality can consist of a borrowing of established semiotic conventions of other media. Within his relational pedagogy, Kern has outlined, for example, Meyrowitz's production variables of different kinds of expressive media (Kern 2015, 241):

Table 5: Production variables for different media (based on Meyrowitz 1998, as compiled in Kern 2015, 241)

Writing	Print	Photography	Radio/Audio	TV/Film
Location of surface or material with which writing is done	Size/shape of page	Framing	Mike pickup pattern(s)	(most photo variables)
	Color(s) of paper	Angle	Sound perspective	(all audio variables)
Size of surface or material	Thickness of paper	Selection of focus	Electronic volume	Visual fade in/out
Shape of surface or material	Texture of paper	Depth of field	Electronic tone	Cuts
Nature or texture of surface or material	Size(s) of type	Lens (wide-angle vs. telephoto)	Frequency filter(s)	Dissolves
Type of stylus or other mechanism for forming signs	Typeface design		Fade-up/fade-out	Cross-cutting
	Color(s) of type	Aperture setting	Cross-fade	Length of shots
Color(s) of writing or substrate	Use of italics/bold	Shutter speed	Multitracking	Zooms vs. dollies
Punctuation	Widths of columns	Type of film	Segue/silence	Pans vs. trucks
Erasability	Spacing	Filter(s)	Echo	Tilts up/tilts down
Size and style of writing	Paragraph breaks	Double exposure	Speed changes	Still or shaking camera
Organization of text and space	Punctuation	Color balance	Backwards	Objective vs. subjective shots
Inclusion of drawing or other non-linguistic forms	Use of blank space	Contrast	Channel separation	Split screen and multi-image
	Mosaic of text and graphics	Type of paper	Channel balance	Rack focus
		Cropping		Follow focus
	Page layout	Size/shape of image		Juxtapositions of sound and image

What these sets of variables emphasize is the fundamental materiality that directs the aesthetic realisation of different expressive mediums. Digital games have their own materiality and may

additionally *simulate* production variables from other media as needed. A simulation of the aesthetic qualities of other media stems from both pragmatic and creative concerns – relating to technological constraints (the computing requirements of 2D, simulated 3D and real 3D game environments), labour constraints (the time and talent needed to develop one approach over another), the vision of the game's designers, and changing aesthetic conventions of game media over time. In considering the media that games might draw from, here are just a few relevant points:

a) Early interactive fiction and current 'readerly' digital games

Many of the earliest digital games were text-based as the memory and processing capacity of personal computers was still quite limited to sustain the graphics heavy games which would later become dominant. Within this context, interactive fiction developed as one of the earliest genres of digital game. In particular "parser-based IF", also known as the "text adventure", were popular, in which "players type natural-language commands into a simulated world, and the game interprets them as actions for the story's main character to carry out." (IFTF n.d.). This is achieved through text parsers which are capable of decoding simple syntactic structures and lexical tokens selected by programmers (Montfort 2007, 268). The first of these, *Adventure* (also known as *Colossal Cave Adventure*), was released in different versions in 1975/76 (Crowther) and in 1977 (Crowther/Woods) and inspired a major industry of text adventure games throughout the 1980's before graphic PC interfaces began to take greater hold (Montfort 2007, 273). In this period, game publishers also released text adventure adaptations of books, such as *The Hobbit, Alice in Wonderland* and *Fahrenheit 451* (ibid., 275). One of the bestselling IF's at the time was an adaptation of Douglas Adam's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy,* for which Douglas Adams himself famously collaborated on writing the adapted game script (ibid., 275*).*

The text adventure genre lost traction as personal computers developed to accommodate better graphics in the late 80s and early 90s. Despite a loss in commercial stature, the IF genre has continued under various subgenres until today (i.e. MUDs, choice-based interactive fiction – including more graphic versions of IF such as the *manga* and graphic fiction inspired 'visual novel' genre of digital games, e.g. *DokiDoki Literature Club).* Several affordable and free IF editors – such as *Twine, Visual Novel Maker, InkleWriter, Inform 7* (see Stannard 2018; IFTF n.d.) – make

this genre especially accessible for amateur narrative game designers and are quite beloved within the indie game design community.[66]

Literature-inspired game design is still quite prominent in the indie game development scene. Game Studies theorist Astrid Ensslin has explored literary games in her book *Literary Gaming,* where she describes such games as "a hybrid subgroup of creative media that has both readerly and playerly characteristics" and involves "the creative interface between digital books that can be played and digital games that can be read" (Ensslin 2014, 1). I would identify the following critically acclaimed, genre-bending indie titles as especially literary within this view:

- *80 Days*, an especially expansive IF adaptation of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* which includes procedural RPG elements;
- *Device 6*, a multimodal but largely prose-based escape room, where paragraphs of text represent different rooms, lines of text represent hallways, and where the player has to puzzle through the prose alongside the multimodal background elements in order to move into subsequent chapters;
- *Blackbar,* a dystopic epistolary narrative in which users have to guess the censored sections of the letters in order to move onto the next letter and continue the narrative.

Note that only the first example above would perhaps be described as a choice-based IF. The others lean more heavily into the mechanics of an escape room and of word puzzles respectively, which is important to note in illustrating that 'literary' or 'readerly' games are not locked into one popular genre of play.

b) Other visual, filmic and performative semiotic conventions in games:

In games that are less "readerly" and more visual/audiovisual, there is a vast range of semiotic traditions that might be drawn from. To illustrate a few:

- **Comics-inspired games:** Games that make use of e.g. images, frames and speech bubbles (e.g. *Comix Zone, Gorogoa, What remains of Edith Finch, Heaven's Vault, Seasons: LTTF*). Also important to note here is an IF sub-genre, the so-called 'visual novel' genre of games; These have been especially popularized and conventionalized in Japan and, as

[66] A large example of such games can be found via the independent game storefront, *itch.io.*

such, often possess a visual style heavily derived from *manga*[67]. Visual novel games can be more or less game-like (i.e. it can be difficult at first glance to establish which titles offer choices that matter and which ones are mostly linear narratives that 'run on a track' regardless of player action). Indeed, a part of their popularity is perhaps due to the accessibility of this game format for amateur or independent designers, e.g. through the game editor, *Visual Novel Maker*. Within this category one could also consider comic book story lines and transmedial properties which tend to be shared between comics and game media (e.g. Transmedial games that are based on superhero films and comics, such as *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*).

- **Digital games and film:** Such games feature a combination of moving visuals and audio. The emergence of filmic games was reliant on increasing computational capacities: e.g. where designers are able to compress pre-rendered video and audio assets into a game. Early use of video in games was seen in the *FMV* (full-motion-video) genre of which, for example, the arcade game *Dragon's Lair* is an early example. A newer generation of FMV games include titles such as *Her Story* or, arguably, *Black Mirror*'s *Bandersnatch* episode (and many other interactive film titles that Netflix has released). Outside of the FMV genre, game designers can rather use game-based assets (avatars, settings) to act out pre-scripted scenes with accompanying print text and/or audio. Before character audio was common, these scenes read similar to a stage play or comic book dialogue with print text superimposed on a screen alongside the characters moving. With the introduction of real 3D in digital games[68], increasingly filmic language has been introduced to digital games. The games of auteurs such as David Cage (*Heavy Rain; Beyond: Two Souls; Detroit: Become Human*), Sam Barlow (*Her Story, Telling Lies, Immortality*), Hideo Kojima (*Metal Gear Solid V; Death Stranding*) are strong examples here. Indeed, most popular, big budget digital games use filmic cutscenes to forward significant narrative events, to the degree that one can watch full 'gameplay movies' of such games on platforms like *YouTube* where fans edit these cut-scenes (and perhaps some story-relevant scenes of real gameplay) together into a watchable full-feature film. In this category one can also consider films that have been adapted into games (e.g. the *Star*

[67] *Manga*: A comic book and graphic novel style practiced in Japan.

[68] As opposed to simulated 3D, which involves 2D objects and environments that are designed to resemble 3D environments and movement in 3D space.

Wars franchise's games) and games that are increasingly adapted into film and tv-series (e.g. *Fallout; Arcane; Last of Us; The Super Mario Bros. Movie*).

The above discussion is only broadly illustrative of how the semiotic languages of other media may be recruited. What will be addressed further in Part II of this dissertation is how methodologies for working with relationally relevant media might be repurposed in working with digital games.

2.3.2. Expressive dimensions: The storytelling affordances of the digital medium

Having looked at what digital games have borrowed from other expressive media, this chapter will now look more closely at what is novel about the digital medium. The previous sub-chapter has established that game designers have the freedom to draw from any number of narrative and ludic conventions stemming from pre-existing media and so, in approaching such recycled conventions, there is much we can draw from pre-existing practice in the TEFL classroom relating to play, text and culture. However, it is also necessary to identify which narrative and ludic conventions stem from the digital medium itself and what new – or at least less established – action potentials this affords us in TEFL contexts.

I have previously argued that multimodality alone is insufficient in a consideration of the digital medium as multimodality attends primarily to meaning making as this is immediately negotiated by the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste and smell, and perhaps including sense of time, sense of place). This does not attend to the invisible architectures – 'the black box of code' – that co-directs human action in its engagements with the digital. In addressing this, this dissertation draws from Janet Murray's digital affordances of the digital medium (Murray 2017a, Murray 2012). Murray has promulgated a humanistic perspective of interaction design which attends to "the design of digital objects as a *cultural practice like writing a book or making a film"* (Murray 2012, 1). She asserts three design principles for approaching the digital medium:

a) "All things made with electronic **bits** and computer **code** belong to a single new **medium**, the **digital medium**, with its own unique **affordances."**

b) "Designing any single artifact within this new medium is part of the broader collective effort of making meaning through the invention and refinement of digital media **conventions**."

c) "When we expand the meaning-making conventions that make up human culture, we expand our ability to understand the world and to connect with one another." (ibid., 2; emphasis hers)

For the purpose of this dissertation and its focus on digital games, I am particularly concerned with **digital media conventions** relating to both narrative and play. The co-existence and interaction of these sets of conventions in digital games is well documented within game studies, a field whose contributions will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 3. For now, I would like to take a closer look at Murray's *four affordances* of the digital medium. As was introduced in a consideration of ecological perspectives of TEFL (see Chapter 1.2.2.), affordances describe the *action potential* of artefacts or processes. In approaching digital games as material culture, such digital affordances illustrate the *performative potential* of digital media artefacts. Murray's four affordances are as follows:

"Everything made of electronic bits is potentially:

- **procedural** (composed of executable rules)
- **participatory** (inviting human action and manipulation of the represented world)
- **encyclopedic** (containing very high capacity of information in multiple media formats)
- **spatial** (navigable as an information repository and/or a virtual place)" (Murray 2012)

Murray's *encyclopedic* affordance refers to the capacity of digital devices to store, sort, and access a wide range of information and semiotic resources – this is what allows for the highly multimodal capacity of digital games and what functionally allows for the semiotic languages of other media – e.g. of literature, graphic fiction and film – to be leveraged in game media. Her *spatial* affordance addresses how digital systems are designed to make these resources available and navigable. Her *participatory* affordance (which she prefers over the term 'interaction') are the calls to sustained human action that are afforded by the medium. In considering how users participate in digital media – especially digital games – in comparison to other expressive media, Game Design theorist Andrew Mactavish argues that:

> "The reader of a novel or the viewer of a film actively engages with the work by interpreting it. This psychological interaction with the work can discursively affect how others interpret it, but it does not change the work's fundamental structure or organization […] Digital games, however, require that players physically interact with the work, whether it's to guide characters through the game space, modify the game world, or even to create new game elements." (Mactavish 2007, 2).

In other words, the player of a game is cast beyond the role of reader, to the roles of participant and even co-author of the gametext. Within game studies and sister disciplines that have also engaged with digital games, such as literary studies, significant attention has been put into the

participatory structures that are offered to players, for instance, in the form of branching narratives (see Ryan 2011; Ryan 2015; Bode & Dietrich 2013).

Finally, *procedurality* is perhaps the most defining affordance of digital media, as digital devices and their programs are built from rule systems which determine how users can engage with them. If I push this button, the character on the screen will jump; if I search this term, the machine will parse a database for matches; if I click here, the machine will navigate me there. I have already addressed how all classically defined games – digital or not – feature some kind of rule-system – the innovation within digital games is that this rule system is computationally realized, rather than relying solely on human moderation. The procedurality of digital systems is what invites participation from human actors. Murray notes that "The relationship between the interactor and any digital artifact is reciprocal, active and open to frustrating miscommunication. *The designer must therefore script both sides so that the action of humans and machines are meaningful to one another.*" (Murray 2012, 55; emphasis hers). This is not so far removed from Salen & Zimmerman's notion of games as 'possibility spaces' as defined earlier in this dissertation. Game theorist, Ian Bogost, further argues that the "core representational mode" for digital games as an expressive, cultural medium, is their procedurality. He argues for a "*procedural rhetoric"* within game studies which explores "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (Bogost 2007, ix). While Murray does not necessarily regard digital games as distinct from other digital media, Bogost argues that:

> "videogames, unlike some forms of computational persuasion, have unique persuasive powers. While "ordinary" software like word processors and photo editing applications are often used to create expressive artifacts, those completed artifacts do not usually rely on the computer to bear meaning. Videogames are computational artifacts that have cultural meaning as computational artifact." (ibid).

Although several figures within game studies and digital education emphasize the importance of procedurality towards understanding the expressive potential of computing environments, this aspect is possibly the least approachable for lay people to grasp, which may include actors in educational systems that nonetheless engage with digital media in educational practice, including teachers, pupils, administrators, and materials designers. Bogost argues for a *procedural literacy*, which he says "entails the ability to reconfigure basic concepts and rules to understand and solve problems, not just on the computer, but in general." (Bogost 2005, 32). Procedural literacy additionally involves understanding material conditions and systems, and how these act on people/processes/things. Within Bogost's view, digital games are procedural environments that

act on players as much as players act on the environment. To adopt a more Baradian sociomaterial perspective here (Barad 2007), understanding games means understanding the *intra-actions* of games, their users and communities, their designers and platforms and how these *become* in relation to one another.

In considering how the procedural affordances of the digital medium translate into expressive conventions specific to game media – particularly as relates to narrative discourse – there are two fundamental designs that will continue to have relevance throughout this dissertation: Firstly, Jesper Juul's distinction between *emergence* and *progression*-oriented procedural designs in digital games and, secondly, an understanding of *conditionals* and *variables* as the core procedural building blocks of a 'multiform' (Murray 2017a) narrative discourse:[69]

a) Procedural structures of progression vs. emergence

Jesper Juul distinguishes between game structures of *emergence* and of *progression*. He describes emergence as the "primordial game structure, where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations, which the players then design strategies for dealing with. This is found in card and board games and in most action and all strategy games. Emergence games tend to be replayable and tend to foster tournaments and strategy guides." (Juul 2002, n.p.). He describes *progression* as a more recent game structure with more narrative ambitions:

> "In progression games, the player has to perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game. One feature of the progression game is that it yields strong control to the game designer: Since the designer controls the sequence of events, this is also where we find games with cinematic or storytelling ambitions. This leads to the infamous experience of playing a game "on a rail", i.e. where the work of the player is simply to perform the correct pre-defined moves in order to advance the game. Progression games have walkthroughs, specifying all the actions needed to complete the game." (ibid.)

Of course, many contemporary games feature a combination of structures of emergence and progression and, indeed, utilize these for expressive purposes. For example, in the game *Papers, Please,* a game where one plays an immigration official for a fictional Cold War-era, soviet-like

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[69] Multiform: "I am using the term multiform story to describe a written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience" (Murray 2017a, 30).

nation, structures of emergence are prominent in the gameplay where the player is tasked with scanning immigration documents to determine who can enter the country and who must be turned away. Every day, the player is given a list of rules to follow (Only people from x country with y type of visa may enter) and the player is then on the clock to correctly scrutinize the greatest number of (typically) procedurally generated documents as possible within a game day or risk having their pay docked (without enough income, the player then has to choose between e.g. feeding their family or heating the family home). Structures of progression feature in the sub-plots that are embedded in this routine play: as one example, people with incorrect documents coming from dire circumstances will beg to be allowed to enter; as another example, a rebel group will give an alternate set of orders to the player, having them incorrectly process documents on purpose in order to facilitate a rebellion. These choices pop in and out of the game, jarringly interrupting routines established within the emergence-based game mechanics, and ultimately have an impact on how the story of the game will progress. This game is fantastic in how it plays structures of emergence and progression against each other to keep the player in the hot seat. With the game's mechanics of emergence, the player is thrust into a relentless routine that expressively realizes the drudgery and lack of humanity inherent to being a cog in the machine of a bureaucratic and authoritarian state; With the game's mechanics of progression, the player has to slow down and reason through the consequences of their actions and – in doing so – claw back their autonomy in the midst of performing oppressive routines.

I will often refer to mechanics of emergence as *iterative play* in this dissertation as this stands in comparison to the *novel events* that are typically negotiated in mechanics of progression and which can function to, understandably, *progress* narrative events. Within this notion of *iterative play,* I will further distinguish between *automatized action* and *routine action*. The distinction is considered significant in terms of how meaning is negotiated between the player and the gameworld:

- ***Automatized action*** **(acquiring and practicing game skills):** Within this version of iterative play, the goal is to learn the mechanics and to implement these mechanics increasingly intuitively in response to the gameworld. For example, in a game such as *Tetris*, blocks drop again and again – with the block dropping in a random order and with increasing speed – and with practice, one begins to develop placement strategies and can intuitively react to new blocks as they appear on the screen. As another example, in *Hair, Nah*, a game by Momo Pixel featuring a Black woman travelling on a plane who is trying to whack away the hands of white women that reach out from the screen to touch the player-character's hair, one gets better and better at responding quickly to the assault of

hands with continued practice. New layers of mechanics may be layered onto such iterative action, but this serves to further hone the player's skills and such novel mechanics generally become subsumed in one's automatized play routines over time. For example, most games featuring some kind of combat – e.g. sword fighting, fist fighting – the mechanics available for combat are what they are, the bad guy that you have to leverage them against changes. In terms of how meaning is negotiated within automatized action: there can be an initially difficult phase while mechanics are first encountered and learned (Piaget's notion of *accommodation*; see Chapter 2.1.1.) followed by greater ease of use (Piaget's notion of *assimilation*; see Chapter 2.1.1.) which also involves tactical adaptation in using these now acquired game skills.

- ***Routine action*** **(playing a role):** Routines involve iterative actions that are not about acquiring a skill but about playing a role as a part of the gameworld. These actions, even when consisting of novel content, do not progress the narrative on the whole: For example, in talking to various NPCs in an RPG, many of these interactions provide more information about the gameworld and one's role in it, but do not forward the storyline) Especially common in adventure and role-playing games: engaging in dialogues with NPCs, strategic inventory management (including shopping and crafting), exploring game locations, configuring a character's abilities. These actions are less about getting better and better and performing more autonomized action, and rather contributes to thematic and narrative cohesion and helps to transition between structures of emergence and of progression. Being in a game role may additionally offer further opportunities for configuring one's experience of the gameworld (how skill trees and the use of particular equipment informs the accessibility or quality of game's mechanics). Performance of routine actions *can* also trigger narrative progression, in which the transition between *routine action* and *novel events* is more subtly realized.

These kinds of iterative action can be contrasted with structures of progression, in particular, narrative action:

- ***Narrative action*** **(participation in narrative progression):** Actions that not just trigger narrative events, but that allow for direct participation in the narrative discourse of the game. This includes: Reasoning through story-specific game puzzles, making story-

relevant choices; and otherwise fulfilling necessary game conditions to move on in the story.

As the example of *Papers, Please* demonstrates: *all kinds of action can be leveraged expressively in game design*. However, the different kinds of action implicate different methodological resonances in TEFL. For example, narrative action is likely to align with methodologies involving narrative media (as well as communicative tasks; see Chapters 4 and 5) as these are typically understood in TEFL. Iterative action, in comparison, may or may not resemble communicative activity (e.g. scanning documents in *Paper's Please* vs. dropping blocks in *Tetris*), but where it does involve communicative activity, iterative play might also qualify as language practice. Note that from the view expressed here, even if iterative play does not involve language practice – it is still relevant to a player's negotiation of meaning within the semiotic domain of the gameworld and, as such, is explorable through an expressive or cultural lens (see Chapters 5 and 6).

b) Conditionals and variables in game narratives (IF / THEN Structures)

These procedural structures create a more enduring relationship between choices made earlier in a narrative and the overall narrative that is experienced by the player. They also allow for configurational choices (for example, in an RPG, where a player-character's gender or class can be chosen) which may or may not have an impact throughout a game's narrative. These are important to elucidate since in many narrative games with conditionals or variables that rely on player action, these structures can be more or less overt (i.e. buried in a black box of code). Players who are unfamiliar with such structures may be completely unaware of the way in which these structures constrain and afford their participation in a game's narrative.

Conditionals are a fundamental procedural structure which, when applied to player action and narrative progression, relate to how narrative options only unfold if a condition has been met **at some point** throughout the narrative. So, for example, IF the character has explored the cave, only THEN will the system give the player a certain set of dialogue options relating to the cave when speaking with NPCs. This structure is fundamental to all digital programming, but for our purposes, we are concerned with how these structures call for and respond to player action, particularly in triggering narrative progression. For example, in a point-and-click adventure game, a character may only able to ask for particular information from an NPC 'IF' they have seen a particular thing that requires further investigation. Another example is a character only being able to open a door IF they have found the key. Configurational choices in RPGs, as mentioned

above, also typically qualify here (e.g. only IF my character is an elf, THEN this dialogue option with a particular NPC will become available).

Variables are involved in *conditional* structures and refer to "the ability of a program to store information in computer memory with the intention of reusing it later. Formally speaking, a variable is a name that refers to a value." (CodeLearn 2021). In the examples listed above, a variable might involve activating a label such as having a KEY or having VISITED A CAVE. What is additionally important to consider are *variables* that involve some form of counting. For example, in a game in which a character can have allegiance with one political faction or the other: Every game interaction in which they act positively towards a particular faction, there is a (visible or invisible) meter which keeps track of the number of positive interactions (and deducts from this number whenever there is a negative interaction). In a game situation, it might be that this number will be counted to determine what options are eventually available to the player – so, IF the character has 10 or more positive interactions with this political faction, THEN they can gain access the faction's leader. This leads to variability in the journey by which players can achieve a particular result. Again, such variables can be more or less explicitly marked in a playthrough. Where a player is not informed of these variables running in the background, this can manipulate a player's sense of control in a gameworld. For example, in the interactive fiction game, *Bury me, my love,* in which the player takes on the role of Majd, a man who is supporting his wife Nour's journey from Syria to Europe via text messages, the player has no direct indication through gameplay that one's actions as Majd are impacting variables of Nour's journey (including her "MORALE / her RELATIONSHIP level with Majd / her BUDGET / and the presence or absence of specific objects in her INVENTORY" (arte, n.d.). This lack of information and the control that such information would grant the player-character mirrors the lack of control that Majd has in supporting his wife's journey from a distance. Again, this is an extremely expressive use of procedural game mechanics. It should additionally be noted that there can be a certain degree of randomness thrown into the equation, as is the case with *rollable* 'skill checks' – a mechanic taken from tabletop role playing games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*. For example, IF I have 10 skill points in *persuasion*, THEN additional points will be added to die rolls that require *persuasion*, and IF I roll a number greater than e.g. 20, THEN I will pass the skill check. Games can do this as well, but the literal rolling of die may occur out of sight of the player (notable recent examples of games that use visible rollable skill checks include *Disco Elysium* and *Baldur's Gate 3* – the latter of which can also be configured to make certain skill checks *less* visible to the player for those who wish to have less direct control of the gameworld and thus have access to a more challenging and variable experience).

Conditionals and variables when applied to a progression-based game structure[70] are what allow for, for example, branching narrative paths in games – what Bode & Dietrich (2013) explored as 'future narratives' and what Murray (2017a; 2012) refers to as 'multiform narratives'. Marie-Laure Ryan in particular has explored how these structures contribute to the overall shape of narrative discourse in interactive digital narratives (Ryan 2015, 165-176).

However, it is not just the overall narrative structure that matters in considering digital games through an expressive lens, but the player's (cognizant or less cognizant) negotiation of these (more or less) visible conditions and variables – as these structures are fundamentally what allows for a *co-construction* of meaning between player and machine.

As a final exercise before transitioning to Part II of this dissertation, I will illustrate how Murray's four affordances of the digital medium (procedural, participatory, encyclopedic and spatial) might be leveraged to expressive effect in digital games through a consideration of the game, *Her Story,* by Sam Barlow:

To Conclude: Digital affordances as expressive devices in Her Story

Her Story is a short, open-ended narrative game which takes place through a computer interface.[71] Upon loading the game, the player is confronted with what looks to be a police database. The word "MURDER" is pre-typed into a search box, beneath which are five thumbnail images of a woman sitting in a police interrogation room. Upon clicking the thumbnails, the player views short video clips featuring what are presumably police interviews. The interview segments are cut in such a way that the player only ever sees the woman and hears her responses to an unpictured, unheard interviewer. The game never explains how it is to be played and rather invites the player to explore the interface to come to terms with the narrative situation: there has been a murder, the woman being interviewed had some form of relationship with the murder victim and has been interviewed on multiple occasions (as seen by her changing outfits and the changing dates of the interview clips) presumably to ascertain her involvement in the murder.

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[70] This might lead to the question of what conditions look like in emergence-based game structures. To illustrate, consider a game like Tetris: IF I tap this button, THEN the block moves right; IF this button, THEN left; IF this button, THEN the block drops.

[71] Later in this dissertation I will address games that take place through digital interfaces as a particular ludonarrative genre, the interface fiction (see Chapter 7.2.2.).

The core mechanic of the game involves the player inputting search terms in order to gain access to more interview clips. Upon performing a search, the game pulls up the first five video clips which contain the search term in its transcript. Since the system only pulls up the first five videos that feature a particular phrase, the player must think up increasingly specific search terms in order to gain access to clips that show the woman later on in the interview process. These clips from later in the interview process are also closer to the core mysteries offered by the narrative. Players have to listen and watch closely to the interview clips to come up with search terms to use in the future. The more clips the player gains access to, the more the details of the underlying story come to the surface. This search function as a gameplay mechanic is representative of several of Murray's affordances:

a) *The game is procedural*, or rule-based, in that IF the player inputs a search term, THEN the game will search the transcripts of the video clips for matches, and THEN present the first five matches that include this term. Interestingly, *Her Story* features a largely *emergence*-based game structure as opposed to the *progression*-based structure that Juul identifies as especially typical of narrative-heavy games. This works because story progression is encapsulated in the film clips themselves – the emergence mechanic of inputting search terms then determines the order in which the player is confronted with the story-laden film clips.
b) *The game is spatial* in that its mechanics are made accessible and navigable through a familiar interface (i.e. a simulated computer desktop) which includes predictable functions (e.g. a search box that allows players to navigate to further media).
c) The game is encyclopedic in the way the game functions through a database of transcripts and video clips. As stated by Murray, "The most capacious medium ever invented, the computer can contain and transmit more information in humanly accessible form than all previous media combined." (Murray 2012, 66). Non-linear access to the narrative events of the game is made possible through this encyclopedic function of the game. This is what invites the player to scour the clips for important details, to come up with their own search terms, and to continue to piece together the story bit by bit. If the core media of the game, the interview clips, were to be delivered in a non-digital and non-encyclopedic way (which would involve the player watching the clips in a linear fashion) the player would not be afforded the opportunity to engage with the details of the text in the same way – and it would ultimately spoil the game-like quality of the game.

(Perhaps one could attempt to replicate this in an analogue way – using a printed index and labelled cassettes – but this would be tedious to execute and use).

d) *The game is participatory* in that the story that the player has access to depends entirely on their own active inquiry into the text. It demands that the player use the search function and actively pay attention to each piece of media offered in response. Without access to guides, it is exceedingly difficult to unearth each video clip offered by the game, and so different players may come away from the game having seen different clips and in a different order, which may also facilitate different understandings of the narrative. Access to the story is entirely dependent on the continued and deliberate participation of the player with the narrative possibilities of the game.

This game is an interesting example of a deeply ludonarrative text that makes expressive use of its many digital affordances – i.e. This game can not be understood based on conventions of pre-existing media and the notion of multimodality alone. It offers a form of storytelling and gameplay without an accessible analogue alternative. As a narrative text, its digital affordances also contribute to its particular aesthetic. In working with such a text in the EFL classroom, effective task design for learners would work sympathetically with the game's many digital affordances (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6 for further discussion).

2.4. Summary of Part I

- In seeking to render narrative digital games more accessible to the formal, secondary-school language classroom, this dissertation posits that more supportive *evaluative discourses* are needed for the medium. In formulating new evaluative discourses, this dissertation relies on a sociomaterial perspective to theoretical inquiry. As Cathy Mills argues, a sociomaterial perspective "removes the conceptual blinkers that obscure how educational practices are shaped by materials." (Mills 2016, xxiii), thus offering the material (inclusive of the immaterial or the abstract) a more agentic role in educational theory and practice. Additionally, a sociomaterial view is critical of taken-for-granted discourses which, for the purposes of this dissertation, includes discourses central to the fields of language education and game studies. It also approaches conceptual tensions or 'black boxes of practice' (Fenwick 2015) with curiosity.

- The dissertation particularly benefits from a Baradian approach to theoretical inquiry (Barad 2007), especially Barad's notion of a diffractive methodology: "a transdisciplinary approach that remains rigorously attentive to important details of specialized arguments within a given field, in an effort to foster constructive engagements across (and a reworking of) disciplinary boundaries." (Barad 2007, 25).

- In performing a diffractive reading of the discourses of TEFL and of Game Studies, attention is paid to the assemblage of factors that might contribute to an evaluative apparatus for game media in language education. In Part I of this dissertation, special attention has been paid to established curricular instruments and pedagogical approaches that are relevant to the formal, German secondary school context – including the CEFR and Communicative Language Teaching – where digital games might fare poorly under a model of communication that a) is largely acritical and agnostic as relates to the value of aesthetic textual engagement in language education, b) attends largely to meaning making as mediated through the target language, and c) that is not particularly sensitized to the situation of digital textuality. Literacies-informed perspectives on language pedagogy are offered in filling some of the blind spots of the CEFR and of CLT. In particular, attention to communication as design (NLG 1997; Kern 2015), multimodality (NLG 1997), a relational approach to media (Kern 2015) and a regard for digital games as semiotic domains (Gee 2003) is emphasized.

- In taking a relational approach to the very varied semiotic domains of digital gameworlds, attention is paid to additive and expressive aspects of game design (Murray 2017a) whereby an additive approach relates to the ways game media borrows from other expressive mediums and their semiotic conventions and an expressive approach involves engaging with expressive affordances that are specific to digital game media.

- Throughout this discussion, it is repeatedly asserted that digital games are 'possibility spaces' (Salen & Zimmerman 2004) whereby action as meaning is co-created between player and gameworld in sometimes unpredictable ways. This is regarded as a 'feature' of the medium, and not as a 'bug', meaning stable structural-functional readings of gametexts are not sufficient in accounting for the emergent or performative meanings as these play out between game and actual players 'in action'.

PART II

A LUDONARRATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR NARRATIVE DIGITAL GAMES IN TEFL

3. Ludonarrative arrangements for learning with narrative digital games in TEFL

In Part I, I argued that we should ask ourselves whether the discourses that up until now have scaffolded our engagements with vernacular, narrative digital games in TEFL are fit for purpose – And where there are gaps, inconsistencies, or knots of frustration, to approach this with curiosity in considering how these discourses might be reformulated in engaging with narrative digital games as complex and characteristically disruptive media within formal education. To this end, the following chapters feature a revised evaluative discourse for narrative digital games in TEFL. This discourse attends to core tensions that feature in game media – in particular, the entanglement of gamelike (ludic) and narrative expression in digital games – and how these tensions might be met through the lenses of different approaches in TEFL.[72] Important aspects of this approach as this is taken up within the sociomaterial paradigm underlying this dissertation include:

a) A diffractive reading of TEFL and game studies discourses (i.e. What has gone into constructing this evaluative framework)

Based on Barad's recommendation of a *diffractive methodology*: "a transdisciplinary approach that remains rigorously attentive to important details of specialized arguments within a given field, in an effort to foster constructive engagements across (and a reworking of) disciplinary boundaries." (Barad, 25). As mentioned in Chapter 1.3, such an approach attempts to be non-hierarchical in its treatment of disciplinary insights and is attentive to nuance – especially boundary-making practices – within and around these disciplines. Within this view, it is

[72] This includes approaches as understood from internationally established discourses of TEFL (e.g. task-based language learning, literary learning, cultural learning, content-based instruction) and also as relates to sub-disciplines of German-specific understandings of *Englischdidaktik* as an academic discipline (e.g. *Sprachdidaktik, Literaturdidaktik, Kulturdidaktik*).

important to avoid speaking in generalizations where concepts and practices between disciplines are especially resonant or dissonant. For example, paying attention to the resonances and dissonances between: goal-orientation of games and goal-orientation in approaches of TEFL, such as TBLL; the articulation of game goals versus learning goals in game based learning; attending to the qualitatively diverse arrangements of narrative and game-like affordances across gametexts.

b) Teaching as diffractive practice (i.e. How the framework could be implemented)

This concerns how Barad's diffractive methodology applies not just to inquiry within this dissertation, but in terms of how the roles of educational practitioners are articulated in their negotiation of the material-discursive landscape of their classrooms. What kind of evaluative apparatus can be formulated in engaging with the diverse nature of games? And how does the use of such an apparatus then implicate further practice? In what ways and to what degree are educators accountable to their engagements with the digital in the formal TEFL classroom? Three methodological frames for evaluating potentialities of narrative digital games for the language classroom will be proposed: narrative games as task environment, expressive text and cultural discourse. These should not be regarded as scripts for how to engage with digital gametexts – it is not about choosing the most appropriate frame for a particular game – but rather about what can be gained by reading these three frames through one another. This more *intra-actional* view of the three methodological frames will be taken up further in Part III of this dissertation.

3.1. Introducing the ludonarrative framework: Core tensions and dimensions

In confronting the tension between promise and practice with narrative digital games in language education, I have suggested that we must not only identify and challenge taken for granted discourses of game use in education, but also that we must attune to the material-discursive tensions within the medium itself and to lean into the disruption of the medium, rather than to tidy it up under familiar notions and routines common to the use of media and materials in the contemporary EFL classroom. The evaluative framework that I am about to propose attempts to do just that: it leans into a central tension of digital games that – although potentially agitating within existing scripts of material and media use in education – also offers opportunities for new and remixed practices for engaging the digital in language education.

The core tension at play is one that comes to the fore again and again across the literature in Game Studies and in Games-Based Learning and which most famously played out within the ludology vs. narratology debates from when Game Studies was first becoming established as a discipline in the late 1990's and early 2000's. The often-spirited debate sought to disentangle whether digital games can (and should) be treated as 'stories' and studied alongside film, literature and other expressive media (narratology) or whether the rule-based (i.e. procedural), goal-oriented nature of games is so defining to game media that games must be treated within a stand-alone field (ludology) (See Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan (eds.) 2004; Murray 2005/2013). While this first wave of game criticism is seen to have matured beyond espousing the merits of one or the other approach (Ensslin 2014), the tension between 'story' and 'rules' in digital games continues to be a rich source of exploration for game studies theorists. From a formalist perspective in game studies, Jesper Juul has described games as "half real" (Juul 2007) whereas game 'rules' impose real constraints on players, but simultaneously offer 'fictional worlds' for players to immerse themselves in. Within a cultural semiotic perspective, Janet Murray contrasts the experience of "being in the zone" due to immersive rule-based game mechanics versus the experience of the story as "overlapping but distinct pleasures" for players (Murray 2017b, 51:00-55:00). Murray's 'zone' is resonant with the concept of 'flow'[73] in games, which creates a compulsion to play and to continue playing and is fostered through engaging game mechanics. Murray argues that in this state players are less likely to "step back and notice the cultural context of play" (ibid.). The 'story' aspect of games, she claims, has an opposite effect, and offers players the means to engage in interpretations of the world and to participate in and examine cultural values. Murray argues that these two forces can both reinforce and oppose one another depending on the gametext in question. Astrid Ensslin in her book, *Literary Gaming*, has established a textual typology for digital games that are both game-like (ludic) and literary. In opposing ludic and literary aspects she argues that ludic digital literature (i.e. more narrative than game) calls for *deep attention* and literary computer games (i.e. more game than narrative) for *hyper attention* (Ensslin 2014, 38-45). Her cognitive approach draws on Hayles' (2007) psychological notion of attention, where deep attention is characterized as "concentrating on a single object for long periods […] ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times" (Hayles 2007, 187; Ensslin 2014, 38-

[73] The notion of *flow* was coined by psychological researcher Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi (1997) as a state of being so engaged with a just-challenging enough task that one achieves an intense, time-stopping state of concentration, satisfaction and control over an activity (Stannard 2022; See also Chapter 5.1.3.).

39) and hyper attention as "characterized by switching focus rapidly between different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom" (Hayles 2007, 187; Ensslin 2014, 39). Ensslin sees the former as more traditionally related to 'reading' and the latter as more traditionally related to 'gaming',[74] although particular media artifacts may play with the tension between these two forms of attention (Ensslin 2014, 39-40; see also Chapter 3.3.2.).

Focusing on this tension from a somewhat similar – if not synonymous – angle, Ian Bogost comments on the tension between games as an appliance vs. as an object of cultural and expressive value. He uses the metaphor of a 'toaster' to illustrate how a toaster is considered primarily as an appliance or tool– a thing that works a certain way for a certain purpose, a functional machine, where our core concern is if it works, how well it works and whether it gives me the experience I am expecting from such a thing. However, the 'toaster' (i.e. digital game) can also be regarded as an object of significant cultural and expressive significance:

> "we have to admit that games are something more than just nondescript vessels that deliver varying dosages of video pleasure. They include characters and personas with whom we can identify and empathize, like we might do with a novel or a film. They are composed of forms and designs derived from whole cloth, producing visual, tactile, and locomotive appeal like fashion or painting or furniture. They insert themselves into our lives, weaving within and between our daily practices, both structuring them and disrupting them. They induce feelings and emotions in us, just as art or music or fiction might do. But then, games also extend well beyond the usual payloads of other media, into frustration, anguish, physical exhaustion, and addictive desperation. Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk-flavored chewing gum." (Bogost 2015, ix)

For Bogost, the role of game criticism is to recognize both sides of the nature of digital games: "the functional, operative one (the face that gets something done in the world) and the expressive, formal one (the face that puts that operation in context and makes the operation of the device more than just a machine spewing output onto a counter or a television display)." (Bogost 2015, ix-x). Within Bogost's view, it is not the *fact* of these two faces, but the *dynamic* between these faces that must be taken up in criticism of digital games.

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[74] Ensslin herself declares this distinction between deep and hyper attention as somewhat of a generalization. I would additionally question whether all forms of gameplay are likely to draw on hyper attention. For example: consider a game of chess, a paper puzzle (Sudoku), or a logic puzzle embedded in a digital Point & Click adventure game

In translating this tension between 'rules' and 'story' into the field of education and Games-Based Learning, Beavis and Apperley have proposed a model of "Games as Text" and "Games as Action":

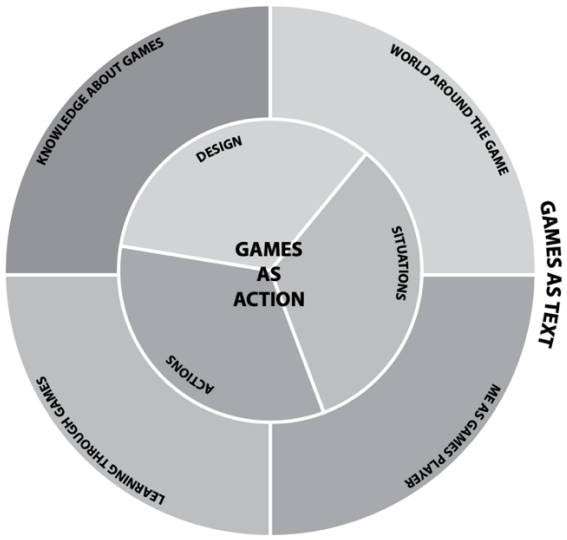

Figure 2: A model of games as action and text (Beavis 2022, 113; See also Beavis & Apperley 2012; Apperley & Beavis 2013)

'Games as text' draws on the notion of text as derived from new literacies studies, where literacies are seen "as ideological, as socially situated, and as social practice" (Beavis 2022, 112). It concerns the sociosemiotic positioning of the player in and around games – their knowledge about games, their learning processes in interaction with the game, their identity as player of the game and their engagement with the world that is in communion with both the player and the game. Whereas their 'Games as action' category involves the following sub-categories: *situations,* which involves the material arrangements of play (context, tech, players); *design,* which concerns the creative forms that player agency can take within a game; and *actions,* as the full range of activities that take place between game, player, game world, and real world. Important in Beavis and Apperley's depiction is that it is not regarded as possible, nor desirable, to completely disentangle the 'text' and 'action' nature of games as they are seen to work in "dynamic interaction" (ibid., 112) both inside and outside the act of playing the game: "Games work as both text and action, entail challenge and interaction, and have ramifications for players well beyond the physical parameters of the screen on which they're played. Amongst other things, these include the creation and maintenance of relationships, links with affinity groups, and representations of self." (ibid., 109). Although Beavis & Apperley were not working within a sociomaterial framework (they rather prefer a neighbourly sociosemiotic framework that is

typical in literacies approaches in language education; see Chapter 2.2.2.), the characterization of material-discursive phenomena as entangled and dynamic is nonetheless well represented here.

The boundaries and distinctions described here have been drawn up in different ways for different purposes, to fulfill different needs of inquiry and criticism. How these boundaries are characterized has implications for the language classroom as regards the following:

- What roles are conceived of for learners as players of games;
- What potentialities of games for learning can be recognized and designed for;
- Which engagements with games can be articulated as objectives for learning in language education.

What is proposed in the following sections is yet another re-configuration of these boundaries – with special attention paid to ludic and narrative dimensions of digital games – for the purposes of framing engagement with narrative digital games in the formal, secondary EFL education. This is proposed as an evaluative apparatus that is sensitive to the material-discursive landscape of practice for educators in the German, formal secondary-school EFL context.

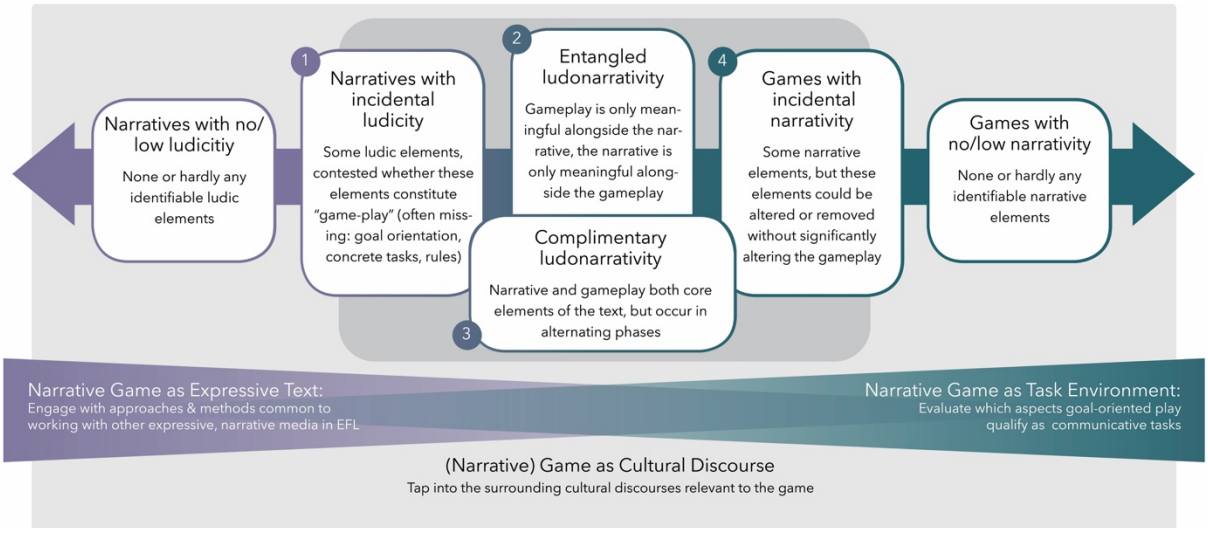

Figure 3: The Ludonarrative Framework

As seen in Figure 3 above, the framework implicates two kinds of evaluation that might be conducted with a gametext. The top half of the illustration – and the first evaluative step recommended when approaching a new gametext – involves identifying where a game might fall on the ludonarrative continuum. Although the visual representation of ludic and narrative dimensions are arranged as a continuum (see Figure 3), it is important to note that this is not to imply that what matters is the *degree* to which narrative and game-like aspects play a role in different gametexts (the question of degree is mostly relevant in delineating the outskirts of the

model which represent game-adjacent narratives and narrative-adjacent games); Instead, the core of the model represents true ludonarratives – instances of media which are both games and narratives – where it is the *quality* of ludic and narrative engagements in *intra*-action that are of greatest concern. The ludonarrative dimension of the evaluative framework as a first step in the evaluative process asks: In which ways is this gametext both narrative-like and game-like? What is the quality of this ludonarrative arrangement? How does the quality of this arrangement implicate learners in their potential engagements with the gametext in question?
The bottom half of the illustration – and the second evaluative step of the ludonarrative framework – consists of three methodological frames for evaluating digital narrative gametexts. These frames are assemblages of game-informed TEFL discourse – an assemblage being a collection of approaches, objectives, agendas, processes, strategies – concentrated around the notions of narrative games as task environments, as expressive texts, and as cultural discourse. These are not offered as scripts for engaging with game media whereas the evaluation would involve choosing the 'best' frame – rather the three frames are meant to facilitate a *diffractive reading* of a gametext, where resonances and dissonances between the frames (and their attendant potentialities and constraints) can then elucidate options for designing interventions for the classroom. A more detailed discussion of the notions central to the ludonarratives framework follows.

3.1.1. Ludonarrative entanglement in narrative digital games

Within the disciplines that engage with notion of 'narrative' or of the 'ludic', it is not an exaggeration to say that libraries-worth of books have been written that seek to question, shake up, build up and firm up the boundaries of these notions. It would be beyond the scope of this dissertation to completely untangle these discourses as they have been negotiated in the process of constructing this framework. What follows is rather a delineation of which discourses on narrative and games have been most influential in formulating the framework as it stands.

a) Narrative orientations on the ludonarrative continuum

For the purposes of this dissertation, narratives are seen of value for TEFL as an *expressive* genre. In this usage, narratives are appealing beyond their implications for the practice of functional communicative competencies as are implicated when narratives include the linguistic mode and afford communicative activity in working with them in the classroom. Additionally – when narratives are well curated and approached within the less efficiency-oriented agendas of literary,

cultural and medial learning – their subjective, affective and artful qualities, situatedness in cultural discourses and practices, ethical and moral affinities, and suitability for extended negotiations of meaning are correspondingly implicated.

A first hurdle when working with games as narratives is identifying which games, in fact, have sufficient narrative qualities to be treated as narratives for the classroom – and the role that gameplay and learner action in the gameworld might play in relation to narrative. This is easier said than done, apparently, as illustrated by the ludology/narratology debate that took place in relevant university disciplines (game studies, media studies, literature) in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan (eds.) 2004 for an extensive overview). The tension that exists at the boundaries of what can be considered to fall under the auspices of narratology and ludology is perhaps simply unresolvable due to the degree to which digital games are hybrid media: In addition to the full range of potentialities offered by the design kits of gameplay and of digitality, designers of games can integrate aspects of any other semiotic craft (e.g. filmic, literary, performative, graphic) within the constraints of their available technologies, their design competencies and their imaginations. The boundaries of what a game *can be* is constantly being remade (see Juul 2019; Ensslin 2014), and so every formalistic rule for how narrative works in games is prone to glaring exceptions. This ambiguity is nonetheless problematic for the classroom when curating appropriate games, as well illustrated in these two passages from a pilot study by de Castell et al. 2017 in which they used the popular, vernacular game, *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker,* to teach narrative competence:

> "the [Zelda] series' extended narrative backdrop made Zelda games appear a good medium for supporting a study of narrative learning in and through digital games. The specific game selected for this study was *The Legend of Zelda: The Windwaker* which featured the same narrative conventions as mythic narrative: the rise of an evil, some disturbance of the status quo in the fictional world, such as the kidnapping of a princess or loved one, which serves as a call to action for the hero. We presumed that playing through a narratively structured game would support both students' learning, and would enable us, as researchers, to identify ways---and specific criteria-- to gauge what participants might be learning through free and 'untramelled' play, about story conventions and components. […]
>
> It was only by watching our participants encounter the Zelda franchise for the very first time that we were able to see, notwithstanding its reviews to the contrary, just how little 'story' exists within the *Windwaker* gameworld, particularly in its earlier portion […]
>
> [For example,] *Windwaker*'s opening cut scene is a non-interactive video collage of text and still images of ancient scrolls. This is a significant point of narrative delivery, which provides players with the elaborate backstory of a forgotten hero prophesied to return, and a fallen evil threatening to rise again. It is, however, possible to skip this sequence by pressing a button on the control pad, and some participants were seen to do this despite being instructed to pay attention to the game's story. Skipping the cut scene means skipping the orientation to the game and its narrative introduction, as well as the backdrop for the story's primary tension, and its foreshadowing." (de Castell et al. 2017, 2018-2021).

From these excerpts it is clear how it takes more than a first glance at a game to determine how its narrative operates and how it is likely to engage learner action inside the gameworld. The framework that is the subject of this chapter addresses this problematic through the following steps:

- Firstly, it helps to determine which games qualify as *narrative games* to begin with;
- Secondly, it provides support in evaluating the ludonarrative *quality* of narrative games (i.e. complementary vs. entangled ludonarrativity, see Chapter 3.3.) and how this implicates learner action and negotiation of meaning in their intra-actions with the gameworld;
- Finally, it offers how learner action – alongside a game's narrative themes and aesthetic qualities – might resonate with methodological frames of TEFL: i.e. Games as task environments, as expressive texts and as cultural discourse

In addressing the first aspect of determining which games actually qualify as *narrative games,* it is first important to acknowledge that while "Not all games tell stories […] Many games *do* have narrative aspirations" (Jenkins 2004, n.p.). In adopting an expressive account of narrative, this dissertation favours Neumann & Nünning's conceptualization of narrative as a text or stretch of discourse which has features of *sequentiality, temporality* and *experientiality* (Neumann & Nünning 2011). Or, in other words, a collection of events located in time (*temporality*) within a meaningful arrangement (*sequentiality*)[75] that gives these events significance, and that ultimately gives expression to facets of (e.g. human) experience (*experientiality*). In a discussion of digital games, the aspects of *sequentiality* and *temporality* are especially important to account for, as games with a weaker narrative presence tend to be especially lacking in these respects: i.e. many digital games utilize narrative elements (setting, characters) but lack a story in the sense that they communicate a collection of events arranged in some kind of sequence. The aspects of *sequentiality, temporality, experientiality* are what account for an actual *narrative discourse* of a gametext (as opposed to a game which possesses narrative as either 'flavouring' to make the game mechanics more appealing or

[75] Post-structural approaches to *temporality* and *sequentiality* are acceptable within this view of narrative. Time does not have to progress from distant past to less distant past and the sequence of events does not need to be in order or immediately recognizable in time. What is important is that this arrangement has meaning in relation to the aspects of experientiality that are being articulated.

as resources for learners to construct their own emergent narratives).[76] As such, in looking at the proffered framework, texts that could be categorized on the left-hand side of the framework must include a narrative progression of some kind (a story, or events in a meaningful sequence), and can be distinguished from the right-hand side where games may incorporate narrative features as aesthetic devices of the game or as resources for players to construct their own emergent narratives (e.g. characters and settings), but where a narrative progression as scripted into the gametext is lacking (e.g. *Tetris*), incomplete (e.g. *Space Invaders*) or largely implied (e.g. early *Super Mario* titles).

In addressing the second point, the ways in which narrative progression and narrative discourse inter- or intra-acts with game mechanics which afford player action is what distinguishes the categories in the middle of the proposed evaluative framework (i.e. complementary vs. entangled ludonarrativity). In evaluating a game's narrative aspect, attention must be paid to both the presence of a story as well as the overall quality of the narrative. The more compelling the narrative discourse offered by a game, the more expansive the opportunities are for engagement within the *narrative game as expressive text* frame. The more entangled the narrative discourse is with game mechanics, the more additional compelling opportunities might be found in the *narrative game as task environment* frame.

A final critical point to consider – while Neumann and Nünning's formalistic depiction of narrative is useful for delineating which games to consider for their narrative qualities, such structuralist approaches are insufficient to describe the complexities of narrative games *at play* or *in action*. Even in games with the highest narrative aspirations, these aspirations are only met with the permission of the player in *intra-action* with the game. If a player skips through cut scenes and dialogue options in a game, preferring instead to get back to the puzzles and battles of the core gameplay, then this is their prerogative – and, indeed, in some games is really easy to do without the player having to make a deliberate decision on the matter. This is all part of the gameworld as a performative and emergent 'possibility space', as discussed in Chapter 2. Notably, learners may choose other gameplay mechanics over the narrative for many (reasonable) reasons: Perhaps they simply do not generally care for narrative play, or they are too absorbed in other gameplay

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[76] Within discussions of *emergent narrative* in Game Studies literature it has been argued that even *Tetris* (a game largely without recognizable narrative elements due to the pure level of abstraction featured there) can evoke a narrative experience in players (e.g. Jenkins 2004) – i.e. player vs. the machine – A story of struggle, and then improvement, with some setbacks and then victory. In other words, players can make even the most iterative play meaningful, also in a narrative sense.

mechanics to engage with the game's narrative offerings; perhaps the ludic narrative discourse of the game simply is not particularly engaging, or perhaps the narrative in terms of its storyline and themes simply isn't very good. A more detailed discussion of learner engagement as relates to framing games as task environments, expressive text and cultural discourse will be addressed further in their respective chapters (see Chapters 4-6).

b) Ludic orientations on the ludonarrative continuum

The right-hand side of the continuum privileges digital-games as rule-based, procedural systems. As discussed in Chapter 2.1., there is a long history in Game Studies and game-interested disciplines (anthropology, sociology, education) of theorists working to delineate the boundaries of play and gameplay; however, every definition of games comes with an astounding number of exceptions. In attempting to encompass as many of these boundary defying examples as possible, more inclusive definitions have been attempted such as the following by the International Game Developer's Association:

> "A game is an activity with rules**.** It is a form of play often but not always involving conflict, either with other players, with the game system itself, or with randomness/fate/luck. Most games have goals, but not all (e.g. The Sims, SimCity). Most games have defined start and end points, but not all (e.g. World of Warcraft, Dungeons & Dragons). Most games involve decision-making on the part of the players, but not all (e.g. Candyland, Chutes & Ladders)." (IGDA 2008, 5)

With acknowledgement that the diversity of games by their nature will perhaps never fit neatly into one single framework for games, this dissertation finds two approaches useful for the purposes here. The first is a straightforward definition put forward by Salen & Zimmerman: "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial **conflict**, defined by **rules**, that results in a quantifiable **outcome**." (Salen & Zimmerman 2003, 96; emphasis mine). A second more involved framework is Jesper Juul's model of games and game-like media:

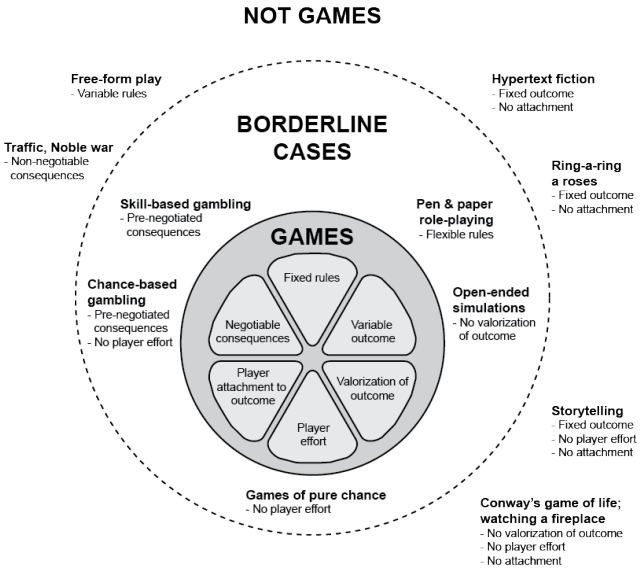

Figure 4: Jesper Juul's model of game and game-like media (Juul 2005, 44)

At the center of this model are Juul's six core features of games (Juul 2005, 36-43):

1) **Rules:** "Games are rule-based" (36). In digital games, these rules are largely procedurally realized: i.e. the rules are typically programed into and run on a digital device, rather than being negotiated and implemented by players themselves.
2) **Variable, quantifiable outcome:** "the rules of the game provide different possible outcomes." (38): e.g. winning or losing, progressing or not progressing, having a high or low score, having unlocked all of a game's features or content. According to Juul, the outcome is ideally unambiguous.
3) **Valorization of outcome:** "some of the possible outcomes of the game are *better* than others." (40): e.g. winning is better than losing, having a high score is better than having a low score, unlocking more of the game is preferable to unlocking less of the game.
4) **Player effort:** "games are challenging, or contain a conflict. It is part of the rules of most games (except games of pure chance) that the player's actions can influence the state of the game and the game's outcome." (40). Players have to invest energy into the game, whether in the form of physical skill, tactical ability, problem-solving ability, etc.
5) **Player attached to outcome:** When a player is invested in a game, they are emotionally attached to the outcome: e.g. enjoy winning and resent losing.
6) **Negotiable consequences:** "A game is characterized by the fact that it can *optionally* be assigned real-life consequences." (41)

Juul refers to "borderline" game genres that may be missing one or more of these features. Some such genres, such as simulations and sandboxes, I am considering game-like enough to be considered for discussion in this dissertation – in particular, since certain open-ended play-based

media and narrative-oriented media are nonetheless marketed and consumed as 'digital games' by the larger public (and are sold as such on games-based digital storefronts). This dissertation also includes for consideration self-aware (often independent) games that poke fun at the definitional features of games and, in doing so, might push themselves out of the boundaries of typical game criteria. Juul himself considers such games that would fall outside of his own 2005 model of games in his more recent research on independent games (see Juul 2019).

As a final cautionary word on adopting any kind of formal games definition: What makes a gametext game-like (rule and goal-oriented play) or play-like (open-ended, creative play) is not just based on the game designers' intentional programming of the gametext, but also on how it is played in connection with its players. As mentioned in Chapter 2.1.1., the boundaries between *paida* and *ludus* can be fluid in that players may find themselves playing outside of the game goals explicitly communicated by the game or, alternatively, players may impose their own goals outside of those originally intended for the game (e.g. the practice of *speedrunning*, where players try to get through the game in the fastest way possible, which may include exploiting bugs and loopholes which may result in large parts of the game being skipped entirely). Outside of firm definitions of what a game is, it can not be forgotten that games are not fixed scripts but are rather 'possibility spaces' and include possibilities for action (intra-actions) outside of what is explicitly designed for. Any digital media that is game-like is worth evaluating under the *(narrative) game as task environment* frame to see whether the game goals and/or play processes would also be considered task-like in the sense of language learning. That being said, in performing such an evaluation it is important to understand that – even in digital games where the procedural rules of the game are generally fixed – play processes and game goals are nonetheless negotiated between the game as a system and its players in real time.

As introduced above, where a game sits within the ludonarrative poles of the continuum implicates particular methodological frames. It is important to note that this is not meant to suggest that one methodological frame is more relevant than another (an argument for using one frame over another frame) but rather that these methodological resonances might be approached with curiosity. Where a methodological frame is particularly resonant with a gametext, the implicated methodological designs are perhaps more readily implemented without extensive re-designs on the part of the educator (i.e. less work must be done on the part of the educator to impose their own tasks, task procedures and learning objectives onto the game). Where a methodological frame is less resonant with a gametext, this would require more effort on the teacher's part to set relevant objectives, design novel tasks and create curricular links. In other words, the teacher must perform significant methodological bridging between the game and their

frame of choice. This is perhaps acceptable for an educator who is passionate about the text and/or the approach in question, but would be quite difficult for an educator to realize who is still orienting themselves within the medium of digital games.

3.1.2. Methodological frames and a diffractive evaluation of gametexts

The second dimension of the ludonarrative framework consists of three methodological frames for evaluating digital narrative gametexts. These frames are assemblages of game-informed TEFL discourse – an assemblage being a collection of approaches, objectives, agendas, processes, routines, strategies – concentrated around the notions of narrative games as *task environments*, as *expressive texts*, and as *cultural discourse* (see Figure 5):

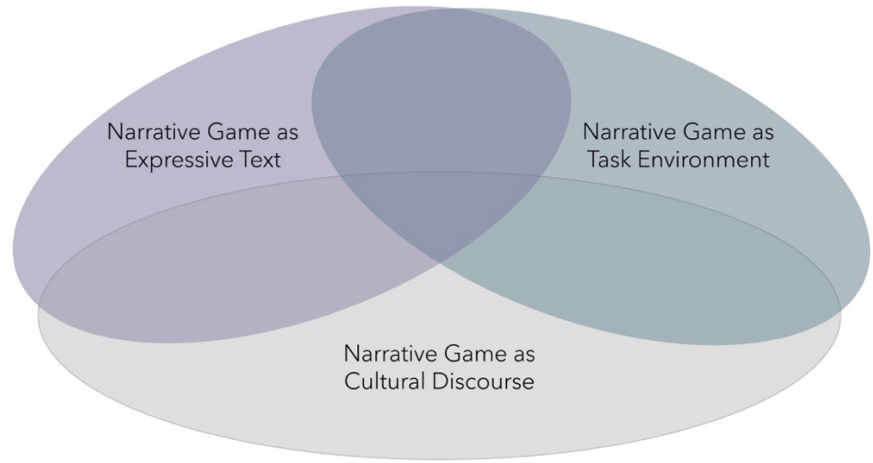

Figure 5: Entangled methodological frames of the Ludonarrative Framework

This anchoring around the notions of text, task and discourse can in itself be seen as a materialization of TEFL theory and practice – where the starting point is not an 'approach', but rather a material-discursive collection of *things* (approaches, objectives, agendas, processes, routines, strategies) that *can* be implicated in engagements with 'tasks', 'texts', 'culture' and 'discourse' as material entities in the classroom. As such, these methodological frames implicate bottom-up, top-down as well as process-oriented designs for learning (Richards 2017) and are not meant to be regarded as fixed. To further explain with the example of a 'task' in TEFL: how a particular 'task' is engaged with in the classroom can be connected to a diverse range of notions regarding what a task is; which approaches, objectives and agendas of TEFL are implicated in task work; and understandings of the processes and routines of designing, implementing, and evaluating task work. The boundaries here are negotiable and are necessarily affected by the understandings of whoever it is that is evaluating a game as a task.

It is with this in mind that these frames are not offered as scripts for engaging with game media – whereas the evaluation would involve choosing the 'best' frame and following a stable set of procedures that are encompassed by that frame – rather the three frames are meant to facilitate a diffractive reading of a gametext with attention paid to the resulting resonances and dissonances when the frames along with the gametext in question act on one another. In drawing from Barad's metaphor of *diffraction* in inquiry: the three frames as three pebbles being dropped into a pond, and the reading into the intra-action of the resulting ripples. Points of resonance between these ripples might indicate synergies within and between existing practice. Where the boundaries are porous, ill-defined, or create dissonance, indicative of an opportunity for a re-negotiaton of theory and practice (i.e. treating 'black boxes of practice' with curiosity; Fenwick 2015.

In constructing and utilizing evaluative apparatuses – such as the framework recommended here – a Baradian perspective also draws attention to how educators are implicated in their own evaluation:

> "Intra-active practices of engagement not only make the world intelligible in specific ways but also foreclose other patterns of mattering. We are accountable for and to not only specific patterns of marks on bodies—that is, the differential patterns of mattering of the world of which we are a part—but also the exclusions that we participate in enacting. Therefore accountability and responsibility must be thought in terms of what matters and what is excluded from mattering." (Barad 2007, 394)

This consideration will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 8 of this dissertation. What follows now is a brief introduction of the three methodological frames that will occupy Chapters 4-6 of this dissertation:

***Narrative Games as Task Environments* (Chapter 4)**

Many theorists in DGBLL have commented on the resonances between digital games and task-based language learning: both are goal-oriented, commonly involve problem-solving, and feature (to varying degrees) meaningful language use beyond a purpose of reproducing forms. But there are conflicts between these notions that may indeed obscure further potentialities of digital games for the language classroom – e.g. Is all goal-oriented game activity task-like in the communicative sense? In negotiating these boundaries, Chapter 4 will argue for a literacies-informed perspective (see also Chapter 2.2.2.) toward TBLL in approaching narrative digital games in TEFL. In considering this frame from the German tradition of TEFL as an academic discipline (i.e. *Englischdidaktik*), concerns here resonate especially strongly with the sub-discipline of *Sprachdidaktik*.

***Narrative Games as Expressive Texts* (Chapter 5)**

This dissertation is concerned with *expressive* narratives, or narratives that are created with aesthetic intent and/or that are perceived to have aesthetic and cultural value. Treating games as expressive, narrative texts encourages educators to draw on pre-existing methodological toolkits for engaging with narrative media of all kinds in the language classroom. It also encourages educators to treat game media through a *relational* lens (Kern 2015) and consider how games as texts are distinct from other narrative media and how the formal features and aesthetics of digital games might be explored through classroom activity. This frame resonates with literacies perspectives in language education (see Chapter 2.2.2.) in that it invites treating highly multimodal digital media with "textual thinking" (Paesani 2018). In considering this frame from the German tradition of TEFL as an academic discipline (i.e. *Englischdidaktik*), concerns here resonate especially strongly with the sub-discipline of *Literaturdidaktik*.

***Narrative Games as Cultural Discourse* (Chapter 6)**

As is the case with every other piece of media, games are always situated within a particular cultural context and tie into other media and discourse practices. This involves a consideration of not only intertexts and paratexts relating to a particular digital game, but also the discourse practices that surround a particular game and that may be engaged in by players as members of larger communities of practice (or affinity groups[77]) outside of the game world (Gee 2003). This presents us with a range of additional genres and cultural/thematic content areas that may be relevant for language learners. This aspect involves leveraging opportunities for making deeper links between games and learning goals espoused by particular curricula and surrounding educational priorities, and associating gaming with a wider range of communicative genres and literacies practices that are of relevance to the EFL classroom. In considering this frame from the German tradition of TEFL as an academic discipline (i.e. *Englischdidaktik*), concerns here resonate especially strongly with the sub-discipline of *Kulturdidaktik*.

The following sub-chapters will look more closely at different qualities of game media depending on where they fall within the presented ludonarrative framework including implications for their further evaluation for classroom use.

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[77] Community of practice is a term derived from situated learning. Gee, although working within this approach to learning, prefers the term affinity group (Gee 2003).

3.2. Borderline narratives, borderline games: Low to incidental narrativity and ludicity

The outer ends of the ludonarrative continuum address outlier media to the ludonarrative games that are of core interest to this dissertation. This consists of digital narratives without (or with few) game elements and digital games without (or with few) narrative elements. Although the core interest of this dissertation is the middle of the framework, it is still helpful to consider these ludonarrative-adjacent categories which includes 'game-adjacent narratives' that masquerade as games – and that are indeed marketed and sold as such (e.g. *Florence*) – as well as 'narrative-adjacent games' that have not much in the way of a story despite featuring narrative elements that imply some kind of story (e.g. early *Super Mario* titles). The danger of these 'masquerading media' is that they may not work as anticipated when, for example, a game with not much narrative is treated as narrative media or a game without much in the way of goal-oriented play mechanics is treated as a game. For instance, attempting to approach *Florence* as a game and expecting game-like engagement from learners, but where the text requires no problem solving, no real effort to play (and therefore, no meaningful task environment) and would rather be better utilized as a piece of digital literature. The opposite issue – using games as narratives when their narrative elements are not particularly strong: for example, in the case of the Canadian study that was introduced in Chapter 1 (de Castell & Jenson 2018) where the game, *LostWinds 2,* was used with elementary school students to promote narrative literacy – however, in this game the rhythm of story to play is quite strongly biased towards play as the bulk of the playtime is spent jumping around and solving puzzles. This is where at least roughly knowing whether a game in fact performs as a narrative or as a game (and in what proportions to one another) can facilitate educators in identifying and acting on the *actual* potentialities and constraints of a gametext. This also emphasizes how the commercial discourse of games can be misleading when games are taken up in the classroom: Just because a piece of media is marketed as a game and sold as a game (i.e. in the game section of a digital app storefronts), does not necessarily mean it plays as a game. In other words, one can not rely on what popular discourse *says* a piece of media is in choosing an evaluative frame for it – one must evaluate the balance of ludic and narrative features for oneself.

3.2.1. Games with no/low narrativity

This category includes games which generally lack narrative elements. This includes games that would normally fall into popular game genres such as classic arcade games (e.g. *Pong*, *Tetris*),

puzzle games (e.g. *Words with Friends*, *Sudoku*), games of chance (e.g. slot machines) and social party games (e.g. *Keep Talking & Nobody Explodes, Heads Up,* The *Jackbox* Collections). In evaluating such games for the language classroom, the *Games as Task Environments* frame is likely to be quite resonant here where educators would evaluate whether the core gameplay mechanics relate to and can be leveraged as goal-oriented, communicative language use and/or discursive participation in meaningful semiotic domains (see Chapter 4).

Social party games in particular have potential to be quite task-like. As an example, *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* tasks one player with diffusing a digital bomb based on the instructions the other players who are in possession of a printed bomb defusal manual. The gameplay here very much falls within established notions of task-based language learning (Willis & Willis 2007; Ellis 2018) where the game could be considered an information-gap task: the learners have access to different sets of information (the interface of the bomb; the bomb defusal manual) which creates a communicative need and learners must bridge this gap through verbal interaction in order to meet the goal of defusing the bomb.

Puzzle games are an interesting case as many puzzle games play with language in some way, however these would rarely qualify as a task (featuring goal-oriented, meaningful language use) as they tend to feature form-focused play (i.e. recalling and identifying particular vocabulary: e.g. *Words with Friends*, *Wordle*).[78]

Other popular genres that generally fall in this category can fare quite poorly when evaluated through a task-informed frame. Classic arcade games can be highly abstract and generally rely on the sensorimotoric capabilities of players which precludes the use of language in any shape or form. If such games were to perform well within a task-informed frame, it would demand the teacher to develop their own tasks that incorporates the play situation, creating their own communicative context for gameplay (e.g. having one player play an arcade game but having

[78] A note on educational digital games: Although this dissertation is primarily concerned with vernacular games, educational games can also be evaluated using this framework. Perhaps a majority of the popular game-based educational apps for TEFL would fall into this section of the ludonarrative continuum. For instance, an app like *Kahoot* allows teachers to create playful quizzes on any topic: learners compete for points and win by obtaining the most points. Flashcard apps (e.g. *Quizlet)* and other tutorial-based language apps (e.g. *Duolingo;* see Pegrum 2014) fall within this category as well. The fact that so many of the most popular titles for language learning fall here indicates the lack of range being leveraged in a lot of educational game design for language learning and/or the very narrow range of affordances that educational actors assign to game-based learning. Firstly, this highlights missed opportunities for leveraging the narrative side of play. Secondly, within a task-informed evaluation, none of the above apps would be considered particularly task-like – instead, they rather focus on forms through behaviorism-aligned language drills. While there is nothing wrong with these apps, it would be a shame for this to represent the full range of what is out there in terms of educational game design for language learning.

them only act on instructions offered by a partner; e.g. Mawer & Stanley 2011, 63). The realization of such a frame then is highly dependent on the vision of the educator, and less so on the more obvious affordances of the game. To reiterate: When games resonate less with a particular methodological frame, this does not mean this frame is irrelevant, but rather suggests a higher design load for the educator if they were to implement such a frame. Such a load may be reasonable for educators who are particularly passionate about the gametext and/or their chosen approach, but would perhaps be a poor starting point for educators who are still orientating themselves within the games medium.

3.2.2. Games with incidental narrativity

Even games that are mostly driven by their game mechanics can be themed with narrative elements. Specifically, such games may include narrative *elements* – such as *characters*, *settings* and *scenes* – that suggest a narrative situation, but progression through a story as a series of novel events is not incorporated as one of the core features, goals or rewards of play.[79] Platformers, particularly early platformers like *Super Mario Bros.* from the classic Nintendo consoles, feature such characters, settings, and simplified narrative arcs. Mario, a plumber, acts inside brightly themed game worlds, filled with grass, clouds, boxes and pipes. Through playing the game, players are introduced to Mario's enemy, King Koopa (i.e. Bowser), and the damsel-in-distress, Princess Toadstool, and deduce that Mario's purpose for jumping around in this world relates to his desire to rescue the princess. Ultimately, however, all of these narrative elements are incidental to the mechanics of the game. We could recast Mario as a cat and Bowser as a dog and re-theme the gameworld to look like a junk yard without having to adjust the core game mechanics (e.g. jumping this way and that).[80] When evaluating such games for the language classroom, the *task environment* frame is still especially resonant. That being said, how a game is themed can be meaningful within the larger cultural context of the game. So, for instance, we can look at Princess Toadstool's changing role in the Super Mario franchise (in the latest

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[79] I say 'a series of *novel* events' as some games feature a very reduced narrative consisting of one event on a loop. For instance, the original *Super Mario* features level after level of Mario chasing after King Koopa (i.e. Bowser) until the end of the game when Princess Toadstool (i.e. Princess Peach) is rescued. The settings change, the platforming difficulty increases, but the game features one event occurring over and over.

[80] Educational apps may thematize their mechanics in a similar way. At one point, Cambridge University Press offered two iOS apps for practicing phrasal verbs: *The Phrasal Verb Machine* and *Phrasalstein*. The quiz-like mechanics were identical between the two games, but one had a steampunk vibe while the other had a "Frankenstein-esque", gothic theme. Once again, the core gameplay mechanics were unimpacted by their narrative-adjacent themes.

incarnations, she saves herself) and reflect on the changing cultural context of platformers as a topic of reflection in the classroom. Here is where the *Games as Cultural Discourse* frame may come into play. *Games as Expressive Media* can also come into play, but would then require educators to create tasks that expand on and extend the sparse narrative elements that are already there (e.g. having learners create their own narratives using the characters and settings presented in a game; for an example, see Jones 2018). In considering the three methodological frames proposed for this framework, I have already introduced the idea that just because a frame is particularly resonant with games that have a particular ludonarrative arrangement (it makes good sense to evaluate a game without strong narrative elements as a task environment vs. as expressive media), this does not mean that the other frames are less relevant. However, treating a game without a strong narrative as an expressive, narrative text results in a higher design load and requires more in the way of methodological bridging on the part of the educator. With this in mind, for games with incidental narrativity, the following questions might be asked of such a game within the three methodological frames:

- **(Highly resonant) Game as Task Environment:** To what degree do the processes of play constitute meaningful communicative activity? How do players discursively participate within the semiotic domain that is the gameworld?
- **(Conditionally resonant) Game as Cultural Discourse:** What game themes are relevant to larger cultural discourses? What critical conversations are happening *around* the game as part of larger cultural discourses? How are players engaging with the game outside of the gameworld itself?
- **(Conditionally resonant) Game as Expressive Text:** What expressive, aesthetic and/or narrative elements are present in the game? How relevant are these aspects to the overall gameplay experience (if highly relevant, what conversations can be had as addresses these elements)? In what way can 'wraparound activities' (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013; Reinhardt 2019) be used to leverage or further explore these elements (e.g. having learners use the settings and characters of a game to create their own narratives)?

A cautionary note on evaluating 'sandbox and 'simulation" digital games:

Within this category of the ludonarrative continuum I would also consider certain games which sit at the borders of what can reasonably defined as 'gameplay' (rule-based, outcome-oriented) but that are nonetheless marketed and consumed by players as digital games. In particular, this includes sandboxes and simulations. *The Sims*, one of the most popular game

franchises since its first incarnation in the 90's, famously features tenuous game goals. Indeed, the gameplay is much more comparable to imaginative, non-goal-oriented play, such as when young children "play house" rather than to rule- and goal-oriented play. Indeed, *The Sims,* although iconically situated in popular digital gaming culture, challenges both the ludic *and* the narrative sides of the ludonarrative continuum. On the narrative side, *The Sims* provides all the elements needed for a narrative (settings and characters that are co-created/configured by the player), but the user must generate narratives for themselves (i.e. narrative are highly emergent) and as a result can feature fairly mundane narrative loops that lack the coherence and intentionality of other more deliberately authored narrative media. On the ludic side, sandboxes like this additionally require the player to set their own goals for play, rather than the goals being set by the game system itself (e.g. to build the biggest house; to build the smallest house; to have the most children possible in the shortest possible period of time). Just as simulations and sandboxes challenge both sides of the ludonarrative continuum, so too do they challenge the methodological frames of this dissertation, such as 'games as task environments' – since educators using such a game would have to superimpose their own tasks and learning objectives onto the game – and as expressive texts – since educators would have to adapt text-based approaches to accommodate texts with less authorial cohesion. In other words, the design load for educators when working with such games as tasks or as texts can be quite high. Other popular sandbox titles that would have similar challenges include *Animal Crossing*, *Minecraft*, or *City Skylines.*

That being said, there is a case to be made for certain more restrained sandbox/simulation apps that are amenable to communicative tasks: *Elegy for a Dead World* is a digital environment that functions as a large writing prompt. The player floats around as an astronaut on abandoned alien planets (named after the poets Shelley, Byron and Keats) and is prompted to stop and write at certain intervals based on the tone of the exploration and their chosen writing task (e.g. adapting a poem by the aforementioned poets that has been layered onto the game world; free writing; a prompt for language learners). Children's sandbox apps such as *Toca Tailor* or *Toca Salon* where learners can dress up a character or style a character's hair can be leveraged as information gap tasks: e.g. one learner describes a design that the other learner must realize in the app. *Scribblenauts* is a vernacular game in which designers have programmed a large number of words into the system that, when typed, manifest as objects on the screen. Words can be defined with adjectives and adverbs. Tools can be used by characters (a chainsaw can cut down a tree; a car can be driven) and characters can interact with one another (if one types "dragon" and "witch", they will attack each other. If the witch wins, the dragon can

be turned into a frog. If one were to type "friendly dragon" and "friendly witch", the two wouldn't attack each other at all and would simply wander around the screen). The sandbox section of this game features no game goals at all, but perhaps a goal can be prompted by an educator to make this digital system relevant to language use and practice (recalling words surrounding a particular theme; "who might be able to defeat a dragon?").

3.2.3. Narratives with no/low ludicity

This category at the other end of the ludonarrative spectrum is made up of the vast majority of narrative media and would include e.g. novels, films, graphic novels. In keeping to a digital context, there are plenty of examples of digital narrative texts that utilize the affordances of the digital medium (Murray 2017a), but that do not leverage play or gameplay mechanics. An example would be *The Boat*, produced by the Australian public television network, SBS. Described as an interactive graphic novel and adapted from a short story by Nam Le, the narrative follows a group of Vietnamese refugees travelling by boat to Australia. The story can be scrolled through using a web browser and uses a range of multimodal elements – sound, animation, illustrated panels, prose, speech bubbles. The text is interactive in how the user may scroll through the text – sound effects and animation can be slowed down or sped through based on the pace the user takes to scroll through the narrative – allowing the user to effectively 'co-compose' the shifting tones of the text. The text additionally features hypertextual moments where users can click on action points in order to read non-fictional outtakes regarding the migration of Vietnamese refugees to Australia. The narrative is undeniably digital in its execution: as relates to Murray's affordances of the digital medium (see Chapter 2.3.2.), the narrative is *procedural, spatial, participatory* and *encyclopedic* in its approach towards the various multimodal elements and narrative conventions. However, the narrative does not include gameplay elements, i.e. a system of rules negotiated by a player that leads to a goal or outcome. Some digital narratives (narratives with low vs. no ludicity) may include features that encourage sandbox-style play or have toy-like features – in the form of 'action points' that respond when tapped (e.g. in the iPad app, *Alice in New York,* the user can fling objects around the screen that are layered on top of the text) – but such texts feature neither goal-oriented play, nor do the actions of the user impact the progression of the narrative in any way. Other examples include: *Welcome to Pine Point*, *Hilda Bewildered.*

3.2.4. Narratives with incidental ludicity

This category involves digital narratives which exploit some game elements but lack others; in particular, game goals. To refer back to Juul's model of games and game-like media (see Chapter 3.1.1.), he would consider such media as non-games (including, for example hypertext fictions, including simple 'Choose-your-own-adventure' titles) due to the "lack of player attachment to outcome". This aspect of 'player attachment to outcome' is subjective, however, and so many of the titles that could fall in this category could arguably also fall into the middle of the ludonarrative framework depending on how 'game-like' the title 'feels' for individual players. Below, I have included certain titles and genres for consideration:

Example 1: Florence

Florence is an interesting example as it generated a significant amount of buzz in the indie game community when it was first released. It is a love story about a woman and man who fall in love over a shared passion for music and then eventually drift apart. Although it was praised in the game community, particularly by game critics and bloggers friendly to the indie gaming scene, it lacks several features of games: No real player effort is needed to navigate the text. It features small entertaining 'activities' that pair well with the narrative's themes, but these present no challenge and require no reasoning on the part of the player. It is a lovely little digital narrative produced by a popular indie game studio. Leveraging this as an 'expressive text' (Chapter 5) would be quite reasonable. However, the lack of game features means there is little in the way of a 'task environment' (Chapter 4) to be found.

Example 2: Text Adventures and Interactive Fiction

A popular genre which is a challenge to categorize as some instances of this genre would fit here and some instances would qualify as a ludonarrrative in the middle of the model. These feature multiple narrative paths that the learner can navigate. However, these can sometimes feature tenuous game goals or just don't articulate play objectives very clearly, meaning that someone can navigate the text quite aimlessly and without much investment in outcomes (for example, the IF app *To be or not to be*). But again, this is subjective and classroom task articulation could make progression through such apps 'more' goal oriented (e.g. Tasking learners to 'play' the game in order to find *this* or *that* outcome).

AI Dungeon is an interesting 'game' to consider in this category. It is modelled on text adventures from the 80s, but narrative paths are generated by AI rather than being pre-programmed. This is an interesting example in that it speaks the aesthetic language of parser-

based adventure games (see Chapter 2.3.1.), but as the text is AI generated, it can run for an eternity so long as the user keeps prompting it. As a result, it lacks both game-like 'outcomes' (Juul 2005) and narrative cohesion.

Example 3: Walking Simulators

Walking simulator games could fall either here or in the middle ludonarrative categories. Where a particular game ultimately falls is perhaps somewhat subjective based on how 'challenged' the player 'feels' while playing the game. Walking simulators feature a 3D game environment and often adopt a first-person perspective – like in shooter games – which contributes to the suspense of navigating the gameworld even with the absence of combat mechanics. The walking simulators that feel more 'on a track' would likely fall in this category of the ludonarraitve continuum, such as the game *Virginia*. Other titles feature elements that might make them more gamelike for some players: e.g. in *What remains of Edith Finch*, perspective and game controls shift frequently throughout the game meaning the player has to keep re-learning how to play it; in *Gone Home* one has to unlock areas through more extensive exploration. Due to the increased active negotiation of meaning that takes place between the player and gameworld in the latter two examples, I would treat these as leaning towards the middle of the ludonarrative continuum.

Core questions and considerations when evaluating such games for the EFL classroom:

- **(Highly resonant) Narrative as Expressive Text:** Such games can be well-aligned with approaches and methodologies that engage with other kinds of expressive media. Some additional understanding of digital affordances will support this frame when addressing 'digital' narratives in particular (e.g. Lütge et al. 2019). When considering the strength of such media as 'expressive texts', one must consider the degree to which the narratives are, in fact, any good. In particular, one must consider whether the digital affordances of the medium have been implemented meaningfully in the narrative.
- **(Conditionally resonant) Narrative as Cultural Discourse:** What textual themes are relevant to larger cultural discourses? What critical conversations are happening *around* the text as part of larger cultural discourses? How are players engaging with the text outside of the narrative itself?
- **(Conditionally resonant) Narrative as Task Environment:** The activity associated with using such texts usually does not qualify as 'task-like' in the traditional communicative sense. Engaging with such texts *can* involve meaningful communicative

activity in the sense that they involve the same activities (literacy practices) that are associated with using all other receptive media in TEFL – decoding, interpreting, relating to, synthesizing a text – but these activities are neither goal-oriented nor lead to concrete outcomes *per se,* at least not without didactic intervention – i.e. wraparound tasks that can be created by instructors in relation to a particular text. Within a literacies-informed view of task-based learning, some games might qualify where learning to participate in the semiotic domain of the game is part of the effort of play.

3.3. Ludonarrative gametexts: Engaging with diverse ludic and narrative entanglements

The center of the framework – and of central consideration for the rest of this dissertation – involves gametexts that I would define as true ludonarratives: in these games, narrative is not incidental to gameplay and gameplay is not incidental to narrative – both can be considered core dimensions of the gametext in question. The two categories of ludonarrativity – complementary ludonarrativity and entangled ludonarrativity – are distinguished by the ways in which the ludic and narrative qualities of the text act on, contribute to and formulate the narrative progression of the gametext (how events are strung together and the role of the player in relation to this progression) and how this then contributes to the narrative discourse of the text on the whole. As such, the middle boxes of the framework engage most closely with Barad's distinction between interaction (complementary ludonarrativity) and *intra*-action (entangled ludonarrativity), whereas the characterization of a gametext as featuring one or the other is determined by both the degree and *quality* of the entanglement of narrative and ludic expressions of the text. The distinction is seen to be important as different ludonarrative arrangements confront the learner-player with quite different roles as media users, including – as suggested by Games Studies scholars such as Janet Murray and Astrid Ensslin – the more active, perhaps less reflective role of 'game player' and the potentially more reflective role of 'text receptor' (Murray 2017b; Ensslin 2014; see also Chapter 3.1.). As indicated by both Murray and Ensslin, these roles can contradict, complicate and/or reinforce each other depending on the game in question. It is important to note that the two types of ludonarrativity are not mutually exclusive – one game can contain both at different phases during gameplay. From this point forward, games featuring predominantly complementary ludonarrativity will be referred to as complementary ludonarratives and games featuring predominantly entangled ludonarrativity will be referred to as entangled ludonarratives.

In *complementary ludonarrativity*, the mechanisms of narrative progression are drawn largely from the expressive toolkits of non-digital narrative media. To refer back to Murray's terminology introduced in Chapter 2.3., this represents an additive approach to narrative in game media. The effect is one of alternating storytelling then gameplay then storytelling then gameplay. For instance, in a classic adventure game where players spend significant time combatting various enemies on the field (gameplay) and then are treated to filmic cutscenes following important boss battles (narrative). The player plays until they unlock the next narrative sequence and then they go back to gameplay until they activate the next narrative sequence and so on. The two alternating aspects remain comprehensible to one another through shared narrative elements, such as characters and settings, and thematic cohesion between the narrative and the game's mechanics.

In *entangled ludonarrativity*, narrative progression is tied into the game's mechanics – i.e. the procedural affordances and constraints that negotiate player action. Referring again to Murray's distinction between additive and expressive media, entangled ludonarrativity is a realization of gameplay's unique expressive conventions as applied to narrative that are different from what is typical in other expressive media. Rather than gameplay and narrative progression happening in alternating phases, both either feedback into each other so quickly that they are hard to disentangle or occur simultaneously. In action, this means that the player's engagements with the gametext may impact whether the narrative progresses, the order in which the narrative progresses, how the narrative progresses, and/or the experiential quality of narrative progression.

In terms of the methodological frames of games as 'task environment', 'expressive text' and 'cultural discourse', different ludonarrative arrangements require a re-calibration of these evaluative frames: the less entangled narrative and game elements are in a gametext, the more likely it is that these elements need to be evaluated separately from each other and the less likely it is that practices implicated in the three frames will overlap. In contrast, the more entangled the narrative and game elements, the more likely it is that the frames will overlap and offer significant synergies of practice (see Figure 6):

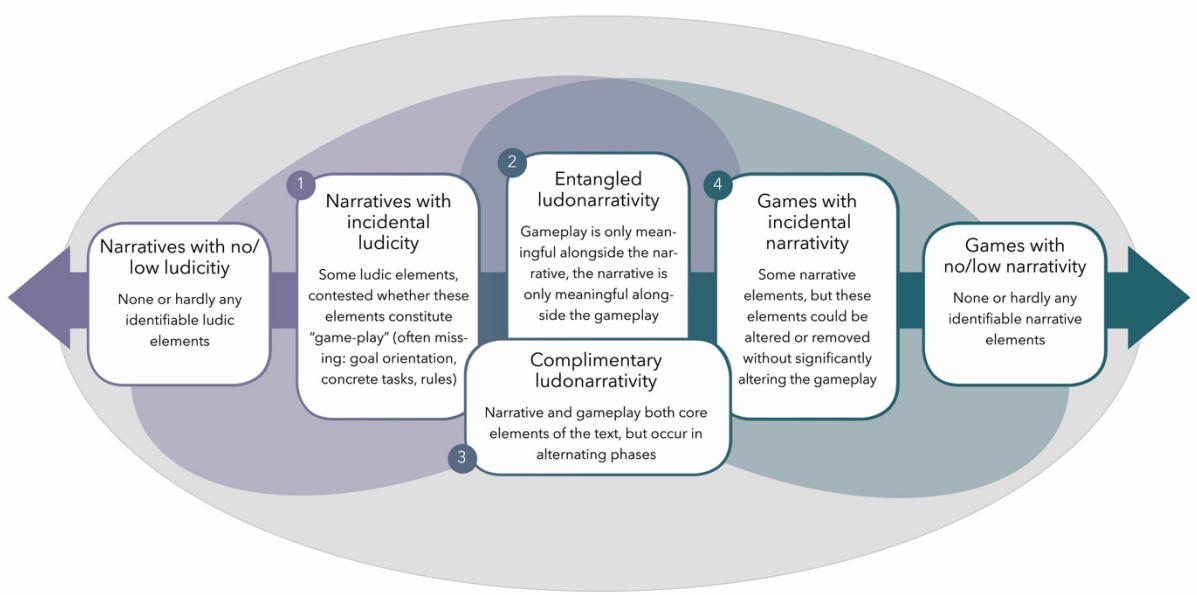

Figure 6: The Ludonarrative Framework with overlapping methodological frames

3.3.1. Complementary ludonarrativity

As stated above, in *complementary ludonarrativity*, the mechanisms of narrative progression are drawn largely from the expressive toolkits of non-digital narrative media. As introduced in Chapter 2.3., according to Janet Murray's terminology this represents an additive approach to narrative in game media. In games featuring complementary ludonarrativity, the narrative and the gameplay alternate back and forth. For instance, in a classic adventure game, players might spend significant time exploring and combatting various enemies on the field (gameplay) and then are treated to filmic cutscenes following important boss battles that push the story forward (narrative) (e.g. *The Legend of Zelda: BOTW* or *TOTK*). Any kind of gameplay (e.g. adventuring, platforming, puzzling) can be paired with the conventions of any kind of established narrative media, although it is especially common for designers to draw from the narrative conventions of film (e.g. filmic cutscenes), theatre (e.g. scripted dialogues within static game settings) and graphic fiction (e.g. speech bubbles; series of still images). These conventions may be combined in inventive ways that leverage both the art style and vision of the game and as works within the constraints faced by a game's designers (e.g. cutscenes with full voice acting are more expensive to make and require more distributed expertise on the game's design team than using static character illustrations next to typed out dialogue). In terms of gameplay, game mechanics featured here are not necessarily functionally different than the mechanics that feature in non-narrative or incidentally-narrative games. There are some additional considerations, however, when distinguishing complementary ludonarrativity from entangled ludonarrativity:

a) Negotiation of meaning in iterative play

In a game such as *Legend of Zelda: TOTK*, a playthrough can last anywhere between 40 to 200 hours depending on the play style of the player, with a median time of 100 hours (*howlongtobeat.com*, accessed 4. Sept 2023). Out of that time, the core narrative of the game as communicated through filmic cutscenes equals about 3 hours of playtime (see BeardBear 2023). If one were to include dialogues with NPCs and other gameplay moments that also count as narrative events linking these cutscenes, this would equate to about 8 hours of narrative scenes (see Gamer's Little Playground, 2023). Much of that extra 5 hours of the core narrative play (not including side quests) is seamlessly embedded in routine play: story beats that are accessed with whatever degree of intentionality while performing routine actions that make up much of the gameplay – talking to NPCs, travelling between and exploring locations and beating boss battles. Outside of these 8 hours of story, the remaining 92 hours of play are relatively iterative: i.e. your player-character performing the same kinds of actions again and again.

In considering iterative play and what negotiation of meaning looks like in complementary ludonarratives, it is worthwhile to revisit the notion from Chapter 2 of digital gameworlds as authored semiotic domains constructed from their own assemblages of meaning making resources and with their own attendant sets of practices for interacting and contributing to meaning making within these domains. When confronting a new game as a new kind of authored domain, players are confronted with an intense phase of negotiating meaning – e.g. 'How does this gameworld work?', 'Which actions can I perform to communicate with this gameworld?'. In games featuring iterative play, these actions become increasingly routine and even automatized over time (e.g. when fighting with a sword, one might get better and better at combining combos to deal more damage) even though new gameworld conditions and mechanics can increase the challenge of these actions over the course of a playthrough. Iterative play often involves what Jesper Juul refers to as *emergence*-based game structures, or "the primordial game structure, where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations, which the players then design strategies for dealing with." (Juul 2012). This is as opposed to the game structure of *progression*, a "historically newer structure that entered the computer game through the adventure genre" where "the player has to perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game" and which yields "strong control to the game designer: Since the designer controls the sequence of events, this is also where we find the games with cinematic or storytelling ambitions. This leads to the infamous experience of playing a game "on a rail"" (Juul 2012; see also Chapter 2.3.3.). In a game like *TOTK*, the game bounces between structures of emergence and of progression, with the bulk of

the game spent in structures of emergence – but where narrative is expressed through or triggered by structures of progression. In this dissertation, within games with storytelling ambitions that nonetheless feature structures of emergence, I prefer the term iterative play and would further distinguish between two kinds of player action in iterative play:

- *Routine action:* actions that are in keeping with what a character would do in their day; can host new meanings, but without progressing the narrative per se (e.g. talking to different NPCs or exploring new game locations);
- *Automatized action:* representing activities that require an increasing degree of skill, but involve less and less conscious negotiation of meaning over time as these actions become second nature (such as in combat, playing mini-games, looting, crafting).
  (see also Chapter 2.3.3.)

Where iterative play involves language play, this could qualify as language practice that aligns with the objectives of TEFL. Otherwise, iterative play can feel inconvenient for the classroom as learners can spend *significant* time practicing actions that are outside the realm of typically articulated TEFL objectives and processes (although these can still contribute to the aesthetic character of a game and can be worth exploration for their expressive quality, which would require deliberate framing on the part of the educator; see Chapter 5). Iterative play that is conventional to particular popular genres of digital play can also be problematic for the classroom in another way: the learners who have more exposure to certain game genres and tropes of play will have gotten more practice in previous games (e.g. in a shooter, a platformer, or an action title) meaning the time needed for different learners to become oriented within a game can be diverse – which can be demotivating for learners with a paucity of exposure to these play styles (see de Castell 2017).

Why does iterative play in narrative games matter? Focusing on the narrative character of these games at the exclusion of the gameplay can lead to frustration in the classroom. The narrative and gameplay can be thematically related in complementary ludonarratives, but might require very different methodological interventions and serve different instructional agendas. If one is attending to gameplay phases, then one is concerned with how task-like the activity is. If one is attending to the narrative phases, then one is more concerned with how meaningfully story and its aesthetic qualities are articulated for the purposes of textual exploration and the text's usefulness as a piece of cultural discourse. Finding a game that has a balance of both, is very difficult – although there are some few strong examples: for example, *Venba* (see Chapter 7.2.1.) or *Papers, Please* (see Chapter 2.3.3. and 7.2.1.). This is different from entangled

ludonarrativity as the task-environment of the game is integrated with narrative action, and so these methodological frames are more likely to overlap and offer synergies of practice.

The above discussion can be quite immaterial for the player who has no need to reflect on which game moments are progressing narrative versus the pleasure of living in a narrative moment and roleplaying through a game's various routines and escalating challenges (although where ludic narrative competence is considered a goal for TEFL, their involvement in this matter may be prioritized; see Chapter 5.3.3.). The distinction is most relevant in the way it implicates instructional agendas and methodological designs that are likely to be of most use for the educator – because it implicates the kinds of activity and negotiation of meaning that can be anticipated from learners at play.

b) Thematic cohesion, ludonarrative resonance and ludoexpression

To address again the distinction between narrative progression and narrative experience, the player doesn't necessarily need to think about when narrative progression is happening and when not since the experience of being in the gameworld can feel seamless regardless of what phase one is in (in terms of narrative or play). Players are still maintaining a role and, in a well-designed game at least, the mechanics of play are still thematically resonant with the narrative and contribute to overall textual cohesion and a sense of immersion in the gameworld.[81] In judging the cohesion of gameplay and narrative in complementary ludonarratives, one might consider the following relationships:

- **Ludonarrative Irrelevance:** The game's mechanics and narrative elements are thematically irrelevant to one another (I would also term this as a game with weak 'ludoexpression'). An example of this is 'slot machines' or 'match 3' games which feature similar mechanics regardless of which machine/game is played but where different machines/games feature a largely irrelevant theme layered on top ('ancient egypt', 'outer space', 'the wild west').
- **Ludonarrative Dissonance**: Notably, the original use of the term "ludonarrative" is attributed to Clint Hocking's depiction of "ludonarrative dissonance" (Hocking 2007).

[81] In particular, I would proffer that a distinction can be made between Gameworld (the whole semiotic domain of the game as a discursive and material space) and Narrative as Story (events of particular meaningfulness to one another organized in some of sequence in time) and Lore (information that fleshes out the gameworld – but that doesn't contribute to narrative progression, although it can support a sense of immersion for players within semiotic domain of the game).

This refers to the situation where gameplay mechanics and a game's narrative themes contradict one another. Hocking used it originally to critique the game, *Bioshock*, where the social philosophy of the game's mechanics and initial narrative situation (i.e. Objectivism and the exercise of radical free-will and self-interest) is out of alignment with how the game's narrative ultimately develops (i.e. forced compassionate action) (ibid., n.p.). This *could* be a sign of weak ludoexpression, although such dissonance can also be utilized expressively – for example, in *Undertale*, where the gameplay mechanics make it initially 'easy' to play aggressively, but where one can find ways to uphold a pacifist playthrough (sometimes with considerable effort) in order to get different outcomes. The player has to *choose* gameplay that is resonant to *good* endings, but generally not before they have fallen into the trap of a violent playthrough that is out of step with the game's overall pacifist philosophy the first time around.

- **Ludonarrative Resonance:** The mechanics of gameplay remain thematically relevant to the narrative and vice versa; indicating strong ludoexpression. Could also be marked in terms of thematic alignment between narrative, routine and automized play mechanics – for example, if my character is an adventuring knight, it makes sense that I would fight battles (automatized action), interact with other game characters in specific ways based on my rank (routine action), and be involved in the politics of the gameworld which could be a significant aspect of the game's narrative arch (narrative action).

Particularly in addressing game media as 'expressive texts' (Chapter 5), this thematic cohesion between narrative and play can be worth extended engagement in the classroom. In this case, playing a game in the classroom (even if only briefly and without the intention to finish the game) could be justified not because it is task-like, but in order for learners to experience the aesthetic, expressive heft of the gametext in question. Game excerpts (e.g. screen shots, screen recordings, isolated bits of text and audio) can be supportive in filling narrative blanks if desired rather than playing a whole game (see intensive vs. extensive play, Chapter 4.2. and Chapter 5.2.).

c) Evaluative considerations for complementary ludonarratives

Core questions and considerations when evaluating such games for the EFL classroom:

- **Is it a complementary ludonarrative?** Can I separate the narrative from the gameplay and watch/listen/read it through (e.g. watch all the cutscenes in a row) and the narrative is comprehensible and generally entertaining? Could I replace parts of the gameplay with

different gameplay (replace one puzzle for another kind of puzzle; change it from tactics-style play to action-adventure style play) and the change would have little to no impact on the narrative? When significant narrative events occur, am I mostly watching/reading/hearing these events depicted to me in a more or less linear fashion – i.e. I feel like I am 'on a track' – and I am exercising primarily receptive competencies whenever narrative events happen.

- **(Highly resonant) Game as Task Environment:** To what degree do the processes of play constitute meaningful communicative activity? How do players discursively participate within the semiotic domain that is the gameworld?
- **(Highly resonant) Game as Expressive Text:** What narrative media conventions is the game narrative founded on? How thematically cohesive is the narrative and the gameplay? When this frame seems to offer more for the classroom than the task-oriented frame, how can we arrange the learning situation for learners to experience the narrative and expressive elements of play without sinking *too* much time into non-TEFL relevant iterative play?
- **(Conditionally resonant) Game as Cultural Discourse:** What game themes are relevant to larger cultural discourses? What critical conversations are happening *around* the game as part of larger cultural discourses? What possibilities are there for players to engage with the game outside of the gameworld itself?

3.3.2. Entangled ludonarrativity

In entangled ludonarrativity, narrative progression is tied into the game's mechanics and, as such, leverage expressive (vs. additive) narrative conventions that are distinguishing for games as narrative media (Murray 2017a). The player's engagement with mechanics co-constitutes the narrative discourse in some way: i.e. may impact the order in which the narrative progresses, the ultimate content of the narrative, and may require the player to puzzle through the narrative (which involves making predictions and testing hypotheses related to the story) as a core part of moving through the game. The pacing at which one oscillates between play and experiencing novel story events is incredibly tight to simultaneous. As a test for whether a game could be considered an entangled ludonarrative, one can consider how easy it would be to pull out the narrative and use it separately from the gameplay. And, if in doing so, identifying whether there would still be a game to play – does the game possess mechanics that exist outside of story progression? With complementary ludonarratives, this is fairly straightforward: I can take recordings or screenshots of the narrative phases and string them together and have a

comprehensible story and still have plenty of gameplay to keep me occupied. For example, with *Legend of Zelda: TOTK*, I can either watch a full gameplay movie on YouTube *OR* play the game while skipping through all the cutscenes – actions which different kinds of players legitimately do while engaging with such a game (see de Castell et al. 2017). With entangled ludonarratives, it would be difficult to string together the narrative nodes in a comprehensible way and and/or still have any gameplay remaining. The resulting media would be extremely unentertaining in the best case scenario or incomprehensible in the worst case as the content would be too fragmented and de-contextualized to understand without the processes of play. And in the process of pulling out the narrative, there would be little to no gameplay left. For example, one could separate all the clips from *Her Story* and play them in a linear fashion – but, firstly, there would be no gameplay left at all and, secondly, the resulting film – which lacks the authorial constraint of a linear narrative – simply wouldn't be very good. The narrative discourse as a process of investigation – guessing what happened, testing these hypotheses, interrogating each new piece of information through play – is constitutive of the piece as narrative game media.

With complementary ludonarratives, evaluating the game as a task environment (i.e. evaluating the gameplay for TEFL-relevant communicative/discursive action) and as an expressive text (i.e. evaluating the narrative and thematic cohesion of the game and the potentials for individual evocative and interpretive responses to these) can result in different outcomes that have little to do with one another. With an entangled ludonarrative, the narrative *is* a task environment, and so any evaluation has to balance both aspects in conjunction with one another. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge: On the one hand, educators are less able to rely on knowledge of narrative conventions from other media and require more awareness of affordances specific to digital narratives and digital games. On the other hand, a task-like orientation to expressive textuality offers its own unique benefits for the classroom. To look at these potentials and challenges more closely:

a) What are the potentials of entangled ludonarratives for the TEFL classroom?

Extensive negotiation of meaning throughout the gameplay: Whereas in complementary ludonarratives much of the playtime can be spent on iterative action – routines and automatizations which involve less effortful negotiation of meaning over time –, in choosing narrative paths and reasoning through narrative problems, entangled ludonarrativity involves extended and novel negotiations of meaning throughout a game's playtime. Where these narrative puzzles involve linguistic signs, then such negotiation of meaning is task-like in a more traditional sense. However, as will be discussed further through a literacies-informed view of

TBLL in Chapter 4, even where this negotiation of meaning isn't task-like in the sense most traditionally desirable to TEFL, the richness of meanings can be taken up into the task-environment of the classroom and negotiated amongst learners – also within the 'game as expressive text' and 'game as cultural discourse' frames.

The negotiation of meaning afforded by such games can leverage unique arrangements of competencies: To return to the *Zelda: TOTK* gameplay movie example: watching a cutscene movie will engage receptive competencies (audiovisual competencies) and purposes for these competencies (watching for gist, for general understanding) in the same way that watching a film would. In contrast, watching a clip in *Her Story* requires multiple communicative competencies and strategies at the same time: one listens for details, takes notes, while the viewer pieces together their general understanding of the story. They might watch the same clip again and again – one time to attend to the image, one time for the metadata, one time for the audio, etc. When the task environment of the game is extended into the task environment of the classroom, further competencies are exercised in learners having to discuss, hypothesize out loud, negotiate action, and report on findings. Here there is a marriage of text and task work through play: Activities that would typically be attributed to task-work in TEFL (multiple competencies, creative use of these competencies, to achieve a goal) and combined with activities that are attributed to text-work in TEFL (receptive engagement, including making predictions, experiencing individual responses to the narrative) are occurring together. Classroom tasks can further extend these possibilities (see Chapters 4-6).

The relative accessibility of entangled ludonarratives for classroom play: Interestingly, games featuring predominantly entangled ludonarrativity may be especially accessible for the classroom. Due to the authorial constraint required in designing these games, such game titles are generally quite short in comparison to those released by large studios. As these games often stem from indie or small game studios working on smaller budgets, such games are also less expensive than Triple-A titles like *Legend of Zelda: TOTK*. Due to the lower specs required to run these games, several of these titles are also available on tablets, like the iPad (a device that is often more accessible to Bavarian classrooms – particularly in comparison to gaming consoles and bulky PC setups) and can be purchased using school-friendly app purchasing programs, such as Apple School Manager.

The leveraging of themes that are relevant to a consideration of digital culture: Finally, entangled ludonarratives are valuable for their unique take on digital cultural concerns. As will be discussed more extensively in Chapters 7 and 8 of this dissertation: in what I am referring to as a ludonarrative genre called *interface fictions* – or games that take place through a

digital interface, like a computer screen or smartphone screen – thematize how identity is embodied in devices, apps and the various textualities of the digital day to day; alternatively, digital dystopias and metagames may thematically and mechanically confront players with the ways games (and all digital media) constrain and direct human action. These ludonarrative genres sit at the crux of games as task, expressive text and culture and will be considered in more detail in Chapters 7 and 8 of this dissertation.

b) What are the challenges of entangled ludonarratives for the TEFL classroom?

As much as entangled ludonarratives hold potential in terms of the methodological synergies between games as texts, tasks and cultural discourse, reaping these rewards is perhaps quite dependant on educators having a certain degree of literacy with the medium. Not least because game storefronts are saturated with games of varied kinds and of different quality to the point that it can be hard for those without experience with narrative play to curate appropriate game titles.[82] Learners are also less likely to have experience with this kind of play (see the JIM-Studie top-ten list in Chapter 1.1.2.) – and if they do have experience with entangled ludonarrativity, then they have likely experienced only bits of entangled ludonarrative play within larger, mostly complementary narrative games. To offer an analogy, if *Legend of Zelda: TOTK* is the equivalent of a Marvel movie, then the entangled ludonarratives of this dissertation are arthouse films. As such, in working with such media, educators may have to give up on one of the most enduring biases in adopting vernacular games for the language classroom: the idea that the media will be inherently motivating for learners since this is the kind of media they use in their free time. In approaching entangled ludonarratives as complex texts, motivation will instead need to be secured through approach and clarity of pedagogic purpose and not through the choice of media alone.

3.3.3. Addressing the interplay of ludonarrative styles: Perfoming a 'ludonarrative budget' of player action for the language learning context

As mentioned earlier, a single game can feature both complementary and entangled ludonarrativity. Taking from the insights of the previous sub-chapters, I offer here a more detailed instrument for evaluating player action in narrative gametexts. It involves considering how action (and non-action) might be sorted according to the following categories:

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[82] Although greater involvement with game criticism, such as that found online through e.g. *Rock Paper Shotgun*, *Polygon*, *Kotaku, Killscreen, and The Guardian*'s *Pushing Buttons* newsletter, can bring some fantastic examples to light.

Table 6: A ludonarrative budget for evaluating player action in narrative gametexts

Additive Narrativity	**Entangled ludonarrativity** ← → **Complementary ludonarrativity**		
Narrative Progression without Player Action	Player Action that Contributes to Narrative Progression	Player Action that Complements or is Adjacent to Narrative Progression (see 'Ludonarrative Resonance')	
Watching/reading the story	Doing the story	Being in character	
No action needed: After triggering the scene, no further action needed on the part of the player as the narrative sequence unfolds.	Actions less iterative: always leads to negotiation of new meanings (as tied to novel events that are part of the overarching story)	Actions more likely to be iterative: Intensive negotiation of meaning features especially in the first iterations as players find orientation in the game, but actions become routine or automatized over time. Can contribute to a sense of narrative immersion, even when the narrative itself is not progressing.	
Reading / Watching Narrative Events: Interesting to consider here *how much* narrative progression occurs here versus in the previous column and *how seamless* the transition is between action in the previous columns and these narrative events	*Performing Narrative Events:* Direct participation in narrative progression and ludonarrative discourse through play. Can involve making meaningful narrative choices and/or having to piece together narrative information from diverse game elements.	*Character Routines:* Being in and engaging with the larger gameworld. Such engagements can contribute new meaning (e.g. fleshing out the gameworld and game lore) but do not equate to narrative progression.	*Player Automatizations:* Practicing and getting better at recurring game challenges to the point that they can be met easily (and tactically, when needed).

To consider how this budget might look when evaluating a particular gametext, I give here an example using the game *Heaven's Vault.* Inkle Studio's *Heaven's Vault* is one of the more expansive entangled ludonarratives to be considered in this dissertation (it takes around 16 hours to beat according to *howlongtobeat.com*[83]). In the game, one plays an archeologist from a fictional galaxy and is tasked with unlocking its planets' secrets. The game involves open exploration of the gameworld, unlocking new paths of exploration and investigation, chatting with NPCs, and – intriguingly – engaging with language puzzles in which the player-character has to decode the inscriptions of ancient artefacts. This requires hypothesizing and testing out your hypotheses as to how the pictorial language works – its grammar, its syntax, its lexis – and applying this knowledge to future encounters with the language. As is typical of games from Inkle studios, *Heaven's Vault* features a highly procedural narrative that involves not just branching paths but conditions and variables that make previous choices continue to impact narrative paths further into the story (see Chapter 2.3.2.). A ludonarrative budget of the game might look as follows:

[83] *Howlongtobeat.com* is a website that allows players to report how long it took them to beat a particular game which the platform then compiles as a set of averages (See also Chapter 5.2.1).

Table 7: A ludonarrative budget of *Heaven's Vault*

Additive Narrativity	Entangled ludonarrativity ← → Complementary ludonarrativity		
Narrative Progression without Player Action (Watching/Reading the story)	Action as Narrative Progression (Doing the story)	Player Action that Complements or is Adjacent to Narrative Progression (Being in character)	
No action needed: After triggering the scene, no further action needed on the part of the player as the narrative sequence unfolds.	Actions less iterative: always leads to negotiation of new meanings (as tied to novel events that are part of the overarching story)	Actions more likely to be iterative: Intensive negotiation of meaning features especially in the first iterations as players find orientation in the game, but actions become routine or automatized over time. Can contribute to a sense of narrative immersion, even when the narrative itself is not progressing.	
Reading / Watching Narrative Events: Interesting to consider here *how much* narrative progression occurs here versus in the previous column and *how seamless* the transition is between action in the previous columns and these narrative events	*Performing Narrative Events:* Direct participation in narrative progression and ludonarrative discourse through play. Can involve making meaningful narrative choices and/or having to piece together narrative information from diverse game elements.	*Character Routines:* Being in and engaging with the larger gameworld. Such engagements can contribute new meaning (e.g. fleshing out the gameworld and game lore) but do not equate to narrative progression.	*Player Automatizations:* Practicing and getting better at recurring game challenges to the point that they can be met easily (and tactically, when needed).
In *Heaven's Vault*: Some small cutscenes that are triggered by player action from the previous two columns; quite seemless	**In *Heaven's Vault*:** Conversations with NPCs and interactions with the game environment that open up narrative paths Translation puzzles that, when solved, immediately trigger narrative events or realizations	**In *Heaven's Vault*:** Conversations with NPCs and interactions with the game environment that flesh out the gameworld Translation puzzles that, when solved, contribute to lore, contribute to capacity to solve future puzzles, and perhaps open new paths for later exploration	**In *Heaven's Vault*:** Navigating from place to place, inside of and between planets
Discursive Relevance to TEFL: As receptive media (see Chapter 5 and 6)	**Discursive Relevance to TEFL:** In interacting with NPCs and game environments: Bridging ludonarrative gaps (see Chapter 4) Translation puzzles: Practicing metalinguistic awareness	**Discursive Relevance to TEFL:** In interaction with NPCs and game environments: Negotiating multimodal meanings (see Chapter 4 and 5) Translation puzzles: Practicing metalinguistic awareness	**Discursive Relevance to TEFL:** Very little, outside of its aesthetic contribution to the gametext on the whole (see Chapter 5)

In considering the four columns, attention can be paid to:

- What proportion of playtime is likely to be spent in each column? And how variable can this proportion be between different kinds of players?
- What is the range of action featured in each column? In vast gameworlds – especially open world adventures – it is not unusual for multiple kinds of activity to feature in all of the columns. Independent game titles will often be more focused and are reliant on a narrower (if not expressively shallower) range of player action.
- How seamless is the transition from one kind of action/non-action to another? A sign of seamlessness is where action feels like it belongs in more than one column. For example, in interacting with different NPCs, maybe sometimes the interaction just fleshes out the gameworld, but at other times it triggers narrative options. The player can not know which is which until the action has happened. Less seamless = a distinct ludonarrative rhythm. More seamless = distinction less noticeable for the player.
- In considering the discursive relevance of a gametext, this relates to how discourse is realized between game and player as relates to the specific semiotic domain of the gameworld in question (see Chapter 2.2.2.). A next step is to consider this game-specific discourse as relates to understandings of communication and textual engagement in language learning – aspects that will be considered in more detail in Chapters 4-6.
- While the table above explicitly considers discursive relevance to TEFL, in treating the game as an expressive text, one might also consider the aesthetic contributions these actions/non-actions contribute to the gametext on the whole. This is relevant in considering the game not just as a 'task environment' (Chapter 4), but also as an 'expressive text' (Chapter 5) which also informs how the game may be valued as 'cultural discourse' (Chapter 6).

I argue that such a budget is more reliable for evaluating game action than relying on the game's commercial genre alone (see also Chapter 1.1.2. for a discussion). It is important to note that games as a hybrid medial genre (i.e. they can draw from any range of expressive, play-based and digital semiotic conventions) continue to innovate: Designers can mix and match narrative conventions and game mechanics of popular game genres so that a sports game can include narrative play, a point-and-click adventure can integrate an arcade-like mini game, a platformer can include the odd narrative impacting player choice. That being said, games that are identifiable within particular genres will likely share some sets of conventions that could make a ludonarrative budget look somewhat similar between game titles. Some trends that might be seen across popular/commercial game genres:

Table 8: An approximation of how popular game genres compare within the ludonarrative budget

Additive Narrativity	Entangled ludonarrativity ← → Complementary ludonarrativity		
Narrative Progression without Player Action (Watching/Reading the story)	Action as Narrative Progression (Doing the story)	Player Action that Complements or is Adjacent to Narrative Progression (Being in character)	
Reading / Watching Narrative Events: Interesting to consider *how seamless* the transition is between action in the previous columns and these narrative events	*Novel Progression:* Direct participation in narrative progression and discourse through play	*Character Routines:* Being in and engaging with the larger gameworld; routines can offer new meanings, but not narrative progression	*Player Automatizations:* Practicing and getting better at recurring game challenges
Sometimes	Interactive Fiction		
Often	Point & Click Adventures (*Broken Age, NORCO*)		
Sometimes	Walking Simulators (*Gone Home, The Stanley Parable)*		
Often	Open-World/Action/Tactical RPGs and Adventures (*Horizon Zero Dawn, Baldur's Gate 3, Fallout 4*)		
Seldom		Sandboxes & Simulations (*The Sims*, *Minecraft*)	
Often			Platformers & Arcade Games (*Tetris*, *Hair Nah*)
Sometimes			Sport Games (*FIFA*)

Notice how all genres (with the exception of sandboxes and simulations which feature predominantly emergent forms of narrative; Jenkins 2010, see also Chapter 5.2.3.) can include additive expressive elements (e.g. filmic cut scenes or other kind of readable/watchable narrative sequence). In genres that feature more complementary ludonarrativity, there is a more extreme back and forth from iterative play and watchable/readable narrative sequences, which is what contributes to a 'rhythmic' feeling between narrative events and play (see also Jenkins 2010 on 'enacted narrative'; also Chapter 5.2.3.). In games featuring more entangled ludonarrativity, the transition between additive narrative sequences and play-based narrative action can feel more seamless.

In concluding this introduction of a ludonarrative framework for narrative digital games in TEFL, I re-introduce here again the ludonarrative framework:

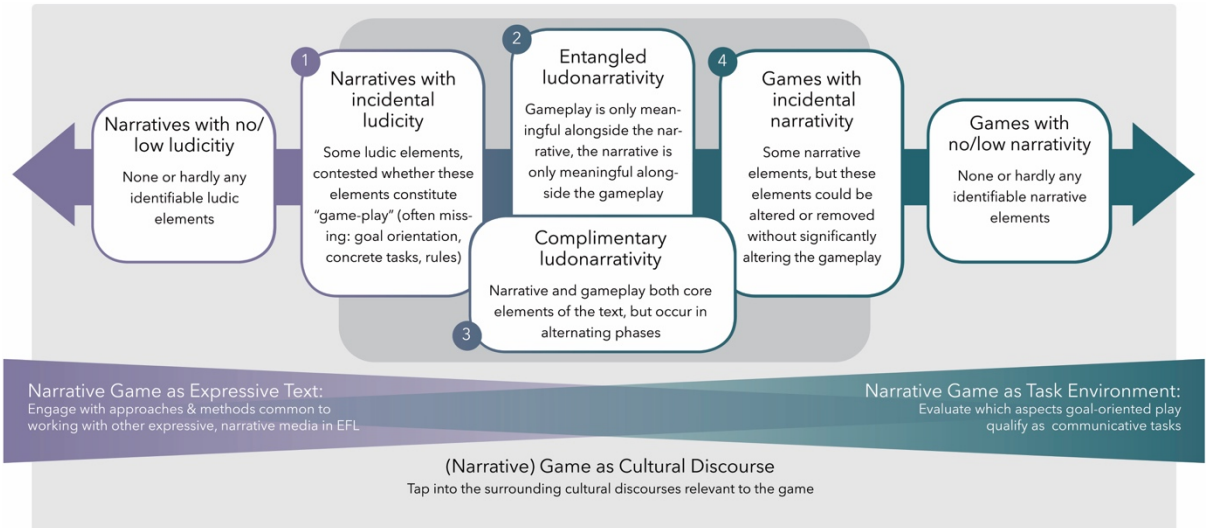

Figure 7: The Ludonarrative Framework

The following chapters will dive more deeply into how ludonarratives might be read through the methodological frames chosen for this dissertation: narrative games as task environments (Chapter 4), narrative games as expressive texts (Chapter 5) and narrative games as cultural discourse (Chapter 6).

4. Narrative digital games as task environments

The framing of narrative digital games as 'task environments' addresses what Catherine Beavis and Thomas Apperley describe as 'digital games as action' (Beavis & Apperley 2012; Apperley & Beavis 2013; Beavis 2020) but within an approach that is especially relevant to foreign language education, namely, Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL). To offer a sociomaterial view of 'games as action', action can be regarded as both material and discursive. Action in gaming is material not only because gameplay relies on engaging with physical tools to navigate digital interfaces that demand physical engagement with our bodies and senses, but also because of the concreteness of cause and effect in procedural designs; i.e. 'if I do this, the game responds like that'. Action in gaming is also discursive in that player activity takes on particular *meaning* within the semiotic domain of the gameworld. I have already introduced the Game Studies scholars, Salen & Zimmerman's, notion of games as 'possibility spaces': an environment that affords players the opportunity for an array of *meaningful* activity as made possible by the constraints of a particular gameworld (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 67). To revisit Barad's notion of intra-action alongside the notion of games as possibility spaces, I offer the following passage:

> "Intra-actions always entail particular exclusions, and exclusions foreclose the possibility of determinism, providing the condition of an open future. But neither is anything and everything possible at any given moment. Indeed, intra-actions iteratively reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible—possibilities do not sit still. One way to mark this is to say that **intra-actions are constraining but not determining. But this way of putting it doesn't do justice to the nature of "constraints" or the dynamics of possibility. Possibilities aren't narrowed in their realization; new possibilities open up as others that might have been possible are now excluded: possibilities are reconfigured and reconfiguring.** There is a vitality to the liveliness of intra-activity, not in the sense of a new form of vitalism, but rather in terms of a new sense of aliveness. The world's effervescence, its exuberant creativeness, can never be contained or suspended. Agency never ends; it can never "run out." The notion of intra-actions reformulates the traditional notions of causality and agency in an ongoing reconfiguring of both the real and the possible." (Barad 2007, 177; emphasis mine)

Of particular note in their depiction is the expansiveness of possibilities that are fostered within a space of constraints. Rather than narrowing what is possible, constraints can contribute to making what is possible both vivid and dynamic. I argue that digital games as 'possibility spaces'

can be regarded as an aesthetic expression of what Barad is depicting here. Drawing from Baradian language, we might say that digital gameplay is a kind of *aestheticized intra-action.*[84]
In terms of transposing the 'possibility space' of a game into the language classroom, there is another layer of possibilities that opens where meaningful player action within the semiotic domain of the gameworld resonates with meaningful activity as this is understood within the agendas and processes of TEFL. I suggest that a task-informed perspective (as relates to Task-Based Language Learning, or TBLL) can be useful in engaging with this space of possibility. As digital games as highly multimodal and participatory digital media challenge some of the more established notions of communication in TEFL (see Chapter 2.2.), a *literacies-informed* perspective of TBLL is also seen to be of value.

4.1. Is a game a task?: A literacies-informed perspective on TBLL for narrative digital games

The link between digital games and TBLL has been addressed frequently in DGBLL literature (e.g. Purushotma et al. 2009; Sykes & Reinhardt 2013). TBLL principles have been leveraged in identifying vernacular games that are compatible with the formal agendas of language education – particularly games which host language-driven interactions between players in multiplayer games or online gamer spaces (Cornillie et al. 2012; Newgarden & Zheng 2016; Peterson 2010; Suh et al. 2010; Thorne 2008; Voulgari 2011). Within this leveraging of TBLL in DGBLL, resonances that have been identified between TBLL and game play and design include goal-orientation, learner/player-centredness, the potential for learner engagement (i.e. motivation), the practice of integrated competencies (including the linguistic and non-linguistic) and the potential for collaborative and communicative interactions (Reinhardt & Thorne 2016; Sykes & Reinhardt 2013).

I would like to interrogate more closely the notion of task alongside the affordances of digital play. In doing so, it must be noted that TBLL has become established as a mainstream approach in language education since the approach grew out of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1970s (Richards & Rogers 2022, 174-199). Its long presence in the field means that different specifications on task-based language learning have evolved over time (see Keßler & Plesser 2011, 159-161) which are attuned to particular learning contexts as well as to

[84] The aestheticization of action in digital games also forms a bridge between the notion of games as text and as action. This will be addressed further in Chapters 5 and 7.

specific theories of language and language learning and teaching that may be taken up in practice. Rod Ellis has provided a discussion on how TBLL has been approached in SLA research from varied points of view ranging from a cognitive approach (e.g. Skehan 1998) to an approach situated in sociocultural theory (e.g. Samuda & Bygate 2008; see also Ellis 2018). The CEFR – which has heavily influenced German school curricula (Hu 2012; see Chapter 2.2.1.) – claims an action-oriented approach which aligns with many of the priorities of popular renditions of TBLL:

> "The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. […] We speak of 'tasks' in so far as the actions are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. The action-based approach therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent." (COE 2001, 9)

Their notion of task here is somewhat more broad than the one that will be addressed below, but the assertion that language is for activity beyond the purposes of language study – as a means of participating in the wider world – is addressed within this description. Within the German formal secondary-school context specifically, task-*supported* language learning has been embraced both for its alignment with communicative, competency-based curricula as per the current *Bildungsstandards* (see Chapter 2.2.1.), as well as due to process-based considerations, such as the valuing of: authentic and situated communicative experiences for learners alongside increased opportunities for learners to collaborate, problem-solve and practice autonomy within the language (Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth 2011).

While keeping this diversity of specifications on TBLL in mind, there are two sets of criteria that I have primarily drawn from for furthering the current discussion: the criteria for identifying tasks as proposed by Dave Willis & Jane Willis (2007) and the criteria for defining tasks-as-workplan by Ellis (2018):

Table 9: Task criteria by Ellis (2018) and Willis & Willis (2007)

Ellis 2018 **Criteria for defining a task-as-workplan (12)**	**Willis & Willis 2007** **Criteria for identifying tasks (13)**
- "The primary focus is on meaning" - "There is some kind of gap" - "Learners rely mainly on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources" - "There is a clearly defined communicative outcome"	- "Will the activity engage learners' interest? - Is there a primary focus on meaning? - Is there an outcome? - Is success judged in terms of outcome? - Is completion a priority? - Does the activity relate to real world activities?"'

These criteria will be considered in relation to narrative digital games – but significantly, primarily single-player games where communicative interaction takes place between the learner and the machine. In approaching narrative digital games as semiotic domains that challenge traditional conceptualizations of communication in TEFL (see Chapter 2.2.2.), I will additionally propose a *literacies-informed* perspective on TBLL for the language classroom. In bringing the two sets of criteria as articulated by Willis & Willis and Ellis together alongside a literacies-informed perspective, the criteria have been categorized under the following headings: A literacies-informed perspective on TBLL for narrative digital games as attends to the task features of outcome, meaning, gap, authenticity, autonomy and engagement:

4.1.1. Outcome

There is an outcome, success is judged in terms of outcome, and completion is a priority (Willis & Willis 2007, 13); Ellis further emphasizes a "clearly defined <u>communicative</u> outcome" (Ellis 2018, 12, emphasis mine).

This aspect of TBLL is perhaps most obviously aligned with games and gaming as games are generally unambiguously defined as being goal-oriented (e.g. Juul 2005). For good reason then this resonance between games and tasks is one that has been documented frequently in DGBLL literature (Newgarden & Zheng 2016; Peterson 2010; Suh et al. 2010; Thorne 2008; Voulgari 2011). In stating that the outcome should be a *communicative outcome*, Ellis is emphasizing the communicative processes that are a part of the outcome's formulation (as opposed to outcome

being judged purely according to its products, e.g. as the final presentation of language or other product[85]).

Vernacular digital games feature outcomes and formulate these outcomes as goals to be achieved – and at first glance this makes games quite task-like. One dissonance in considering digital games as tasks is that within a larger, complex gameworld (e.g. an open world adventure) it can very well be that the player can engage with a diversity of sub-goals and sub-tasks – including goals of their own design. Some of these activities may be mandatory to progressing in the game (e.g. in *Pokemon*: beating a series of Gym Leaders before being able to take on the final boss) or optional (e.g. the time spent catching, training and breeding a smaller or larger range of Pokemon; filling the Pokedex; catching the game's legendary Pokemon). This diversity of activity that feature in digital games is why I would argue digital games should be regarded as 'task environments' rather than as individual 'tasks'.

Ellis's distinction regarding *communicative* outcomes is important: digital game goals do not guarantee communicative processes in attending to those goals, at least so far as communication is seen to require the use of linguistic signs in the target language (more on this below). In evaluating the value of this task environment for communicative TEFL purposes, it is then needful to consider not just the range of different activities that players can engage in and the degree to which they are mandatory to progression in the game, but also the opportunities one has to engage in communicative and/or discursive processes that are deemed of value in TEFL.

4.1.2. Meaning

There is a primary focus on meaning (Ellis 2018, 12; Willis & Willis 2007, 13)

This criteria requires negotiation since an assumption inherent to TBLL is that the primary mode for making-meaning is linguistic (and perhaps supported by para-linguistic features). As communicated in Willis and Willis' guidebook for *Doing Task-based Teaching*, when attending to a focus on meaning "participants are concerned with communication" (Willis & Willis 2007, 5) [86]

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[85] For example, a task where one learner describes a *LEGO* figurine and the other must build it. The final outcome as a product is the figurine itself, whereas the *communicative* outcome is a figurine as created via spoken interaction (see Ellis 2018).

[86] As opposed to a focus on form " in which one or more lexical or grammatical forms are isolated and specified for study" and a focus on language "in which learners pause in the course of a meaning-focused activity to think for themselves how best to express what they want to say, or a teacher takes part in the interaction and acts as a facilitator by rephrasing or clarifying learner language" (Willis & Willis 2007, 5).

and communication within the parent approach of TBLL, i.e. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), primarily involves linguistically-derived competencies for making meaning such as speaking, listening, reading, writing (and sometimes mediation)[87]. However, as was discussed in Chapter 2.2., highly multimodal and procedural media – such as digital games – challenge this notion of communication. In response to this, I suggest considering a *literacies-informed* perspective on communication in connection with TBLL. In particular, James Paul Gee's approach to games as semiotic domains and Richard Kern's notion of communication as design offer insights (see Chapter 2.2.2.). In playing a game, learners are participating in a semiotic domain which involves linguistic signs but also other modalities. In a game, this makes the media more than just receptively complex, since in acting within the game players need to adopt 'discourse practices' that allow them to navigate and contribute to meaning in concert with the game (e.g. 'If I push this button, I can see my character jump on the screen. Jumping can activate levers, and squash enemies and help me access additional game areas'). Within Gee's view, players are not the only meaning makers within a game as a semiotic domain – the game itself is also regarded a participant in the interaction. As proposed in his characterization of games as "interactive designed experiences":

> "In a video game, when a player does something – and the player most certainly must design his or her action with respect for the game and its rules if the player wants to succeed – the game will answer back and let the player know how the game has "received" his or her "turn". This is a new form of "conversation" (reciprocally-designed communicative turn-taking)." (Gee 2016, 151).

Within this view, even in a game that lacks the linguistic mode, the player and game are in conversation. And within this view, achieving game goals can therefore be seen as a kind of communicative outcome, but perhaps one that doesn't rely on linguistic signs in the target language. It can be argued that this is fundamentally against the spirit of TBLL which intends tasks to facilitate meaningful practice *within* the foreign language – but with particular emphasis at the level of meaning rather than at the level of forms. On the one hand, there are indeed games where the linguistic mode features prominently in the semiotic domain of the game and which must be engaged with intensively in moving through the game – as would be the case with more 'readerly' ludonarratives, such as *Blackbar, 80 Days, Device 9, Heaven's Vault* (see Chapter 2.3.1.). On the other hand, even in games that are not considered particularly readerly, but where

[87] Non-linguistic communication, when considered, is often concerned with e.g. gesture, facial expression – all things related to the physical presence of interactional partners as opposed to other modalities.

task-aligned communication-as-design is a core feature of the gameplay, this discursive engagement can provide rich material when extended into discursive realms outside of that of the game, e.g. when game tasks are extended into the classroom as a task environment (see Chapter 4.3.) and/or as a part of literary or cultural learning (see Chapters 5 and 6 respectively).

4.1.3. Gaps

"There is some kind of gap" (Ellis 2018, 12)

As further explicated by Ellis:

> "The [task-as-]workplan is designed in such a way as to incorporate a gap that will need to be closed when the task is performed. The gap creates a need to convey information, to reason or to express an opinion" (Ellis 2018, 12).

These gaps – along with a focusing objective – create an imperative towards communication. The three gaps, based on Nunan, that are frequently offered in the literature (including by Ellis) include:

- "Information-gap tasks involving 'a transfer of given information from one person to another – or from one form to another, or from one place to another'.

- Reasoning gap tasks involving 'deriving some new information from given information through the processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns'.

- Opinion-gap tasks involving 'identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation'. (Nunan, 1989: 46–47)." (Ellis 2018, 10):

These criteria are especially salient within a focus on person-to-person interaction, and as such these gaps resonate perhaps most obviously with multiplayer games (e.g. Newgarden & Zheng 2016; Peterson 2010; Reinders & Wattana 2015; Steinkuehler 2007; Suh et al. 2010; Thorne 2008; Voulgari 2011; Zhao & Lai 2008). Multiplayer games may involve all these kinds of gap: Players may have access to different information (e.g. what my character can do vs. what your character can do), they may have to strategize how they will approach a particular game challenge (e.g. 'you focus on healing, and I'll attack') and they may have to negotiate differences of opinion on these points (e.g. 'no, you heal, I'll attack'). This kind of spoken and written interaction is very much in alignment with communicative competencies as they are formulated in contemporary curricula and standards and so it is perhaps unsurprising that the bulk of research that has addressed tasks and vernacular games in TEFL focus on multiplayer games. In single-player games, however, the

conversation is not taking place between players of a game, it is taking place between the player and the procedural script of the game itself. One then has to consider: Is this notion of gap transposable to the intra-action between gamer and gameworld? What 'gaps' then exist in this form of conversation between player and game? I will now consider these three kinds of gap in connection with single-player, narrative digital games:

a) Information Gaps

In confronting the game as a novel semiotic domain (see Chapter 2.2.2.), the player does not have access to the procedural script of the game and does not know what new things the game will confront them with over their playtime. Particularly when initially learning how a game works, the player does not know how the game will respond to their actions; the player must experiment to discover how to act on the gameworld and what the constraints and affordances of the gameworld are. This can be as simple as playing an action-platformer and figuring out what effect different button pushes on a game controller have on your character's movement on the screen. However, to attend to an example with a more 'readerly' quality, in the game *Device 6*, the player reads the prose of the game and is confronted with a dead end – The game does not directly indicate 'What happens next in the story?' or 'How do I move on to the next chapter?'. By going back and forth through the text, the player attends more closely to the multimodal elements surrounding the prose. In tapping them, they notice, some of them react – for example, two buttons marked 'L' and 'R' above a picture of a door beep when tapped. Unlike the 'reasoning gap' which will be described next, the information gap doesn't require intense focus on resolving a particular problem, but can rather involve a player acting on their own curiosity inside the gameworld, trying things out and seeing what happens. Perhaps this is better regarded as an *orientation gap* where players come to know what things *mean* within the semiotic domain of the gameworld and discover how to talk back to the gameworld through action. In other worlds, 'how does one *do* discourse in this semiotic domain?' (Gee 2003; Gee 2015).

b) Reasoning Gaps

This gap is involved in so far as the game presents players with problems that they need to solve. To return to the example of *Device 6*, now that the player knows that these multimodal elements can be interacted with, the player reasons that they might be the key to moving forward. The player reads the prose again and explores the multimodal elements more closely in order to figure out how to move on to the next chapter. Within established TBLL literature, this could be described as an 'input-based task' which Ellis describes as "tasks that do not require but

do not prohibit production" (Ellis 2018, 180). Learners have to act on information that they have receptively understood, but without producing language themselves.[88]

However, digital games may not rely on the linguistic mode in presenting such reasoning challenges. For example, the game *Legend of Zelda: TOTK* famously has a complex physics system that offers players multiple ways to solve gameworld problems. E.g 'How do I get across this cliff?' – 'perhaps by crafting a bridge?' 'Or by creating a gust of wind using a campfire that I can then ride on using my paraglider to fly to the other side?' In the example of *Device 6*, it is apparent the role of linguistic signs and competencies in bridging the reasoning gap – learners have to comprehend the written text alongside the surrounding multimodal elements to solve the puzzle of how to move forward. In the second example, the reasoning is still fully meaningful within the context of the gameworld and requires a proficiency in making creative use of the game's systems in resolving the gap, but this all precludes the use of language. Such a gap is perhaps most useful for the language classroom where the gap can be recruited into the 'task environment of the classroom' (Chapter 4.2.3.). For instance, where two players play a game together and have to discuss how they will approach the problem or, alternatively, where learners create a gameplay video showing other players how to solve a game challenge. This last example is quite in line with the discourse practices of contemporary gamer culture; notably, *Legend of Zelda TOTK* has blown up on TikTok where such videos feature prominently on gamer feeds (see Plante 2023).

c) Opinion Gaps

This can be seen through the ways in which players *configure* their responses to the gameworld – making one set of choices over another. This is not just in order to solve a puzzle or progress further in the game *per se*, but as an exercise of what Gee refers to as *projective identity* (see Chapter 6.1.2. for a more detailed discussion); in other words, 'who do I want my character to be within this gameworld?'. This features prominently in interactive fiction games. For example, in *Life is Strange*, the player is presented with opportunities to make significant choices throughout the game, e.g. 'who do I let die in this moment?' The game is quite filmic, and each choice leads to a cutscene where the action following a player's choices is played out. Actions taken earlier in the game generally effect how the story develops over the course of the game.

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[88] Example of an 'input-based-task': The learner building a *LEGO figurine* based on a spoken or written description. Ellis has noted that these task types have been overlooked in TBLL research in comparison to more production-oriented task types (see Ellis 2018, 180).

Sometimes there is no good or bad ending, but just a choice on the player's part as to what kind of story they want their protagonists to experience. A benefit of this kind of gap is that it additionally affords a kind of *experience gap* (another kind of information gap, perhaps) between players who are exposed to different versions of the narrative. This *experience gap* can be exploited further, for instance, when looking at digital games as expressive texts (see Chapter 5.2.3.).

Literacies perspectives are useful in highlighting the value of these more 'textual' communicative practices in gaming. In particular, they highlight the potential of single-player games more so than might be the case where an L2-only communicative approach dominates (where 'receptivity' is often implicitly associated with more passive engagement with language and communication – even if this is not what is explicitly intended within most formal depictions of CLT).
Where game gaps do not allow for the direct practice of language competencies inside of the gameworld, such gaps can still be meaningful when negotiated within the interactional context of the classroom (see Chapter 4.3. and Chapter 5.2.). This perspective brings a task-orientation to games into closer alignment with a text-orientation to games, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

4.1.4. Authenticity

The task relates to real world activities (Willis & Willis 2007, 13)

This criteria has potential for dissonance when reading the notions of game and task through each other since the 'virtual world' of a game is definitionally opposed to the notion of the 'real world'. On the one hand, this can be contended with as the degree to which the semiotic domain of the game should be taken seriously as an authentic space for the practice of discourse. 'Communication' in a game can mirror 'communication' in the real world to a greater or lesser degree (i.e. the task environment is interactionally authentic, if not situationally authentic; Ellis 2018, 13). Multiplayer games have traditionally resonated quite strongly with TBLL since communication in these games quite closely mirrors task-like communication as it is traditionally understood in the TEFL context – i.e. as communication between people working towards resolving some kind of gap. However, even in learning to play single-player games, learners become participants in the discourses of the game, but these discourses may have a logic that has very little to do with that of the 'real world'. As argued by Gee, games are 'secondary' semiotic domains not so dissimilar to the 'secondary' semiotic domains of formal education (e.g. a chemistry classroom) where a player/learner needs to take on not just new knowledge (e.g. how

chemical reactions work) but take on domain relevant roles (e.g. someone who experiments) and participate in domain relevant discourse practices (e.g. writing a lab report) (see Gee 2004; Gee 2015). We might attend less to the degree to which participation in these domains relates to real world activities and more to how the processes of learning to participate in one domain are relevant to participating in semiotic domains of any kind. Of additional concern is the degree to which meaningful discourses are ripe to be taken up in further communicative activity in the language classroom (see also Hallet 2018).

The unusual semiotic logic of digital games does pose an additional opportunity for the language classroom: There are forms of language engagement that would typically function poorly within a traditionally-conceived task framework but which can be made more meaningful in the context of narrative gameplay. For example, in *Blackbar*, the gameplay essentially consists of a series of gap-fill exercises. Gap-fills would ordinarily be classified as an exercise focused on reproducing forms, rather than a meaning-driven task. However, the process of decoding these gap-fills is made meaningful within the game's narrative situation: an epistolary narrative in which a friend working for the censorship agency of a fictional authoritarian regime is sending you (the player-character) letters that have been censored. Filling in the gaps is not just important for progressing to the next letter and the next narrative event, but has thematic relevance to the text as a whole. If one pays attention to what is being censored, it is words that convey both criticism of the regime and that represent depth of feeling – where the regime appears to be curtailing emotiveness. Part of the task design for working with such a game might emphasize these textual aspects (see 'narrative game as expessive text'; Chapter 5). The language puzzle mechanic of the game is made more meaningful within the semiotic domain and narrative situation of this particular gameworld. Another impressive example can be found in *Heaven's Vault:* a ludonarrative in which you play an archeologist in a fictional nebula and where you travel from planet to planet unpicking the mysterious history of this collection of worlds. The game was created using the same scripting language used in games such as *80 Days* and *Bury me, my love,* and as such is a highly procedural narrative that involves not just branching paths but conditions and variables that make previous choices continue to impact narrative paths further into the story (see Chapter 2.3.2.). In exploring the gameworld, the player is frequently tasked with decoding a pictographic language which has its own functioning grammar (including not just content symbols for nouns, verbs and adjectives, but functional symbols that indicate e.g. possessives and parts of speech). Previously decoded sequences become part of your lexicon allowing you to decode increasingly complex passages. Many of these puzzles largely serve to help you build up your lexicon, but there are moments where a badly translated sequence will

lead you to take actions that have consequences for the story (e.g. going in the wrong direction). Even where these puzzles do not directly lead to narrative consequences, the decoding activity is still made task-like by its situatedness in the fictional lore of the gameworld. As both *Heaven's Vault* and *Blackbar* demonstrate, where a gameworld is taken seriously as a functioning semiotic domain in its own right, this criteria of TBLL should arguably be re-considered; i.e. 'The activity relates to real world activities AND/OR is meaningful within the discourse practices of the semiotic domain of the game'. The latter consideration, however, might best be paired with treating the gameworld as an expressive text (Chapter 5) in order to tease out these domain-specific meanings within the extended task environment of the classroom.

4.1.5. Autonomy

"Learners rely mainly on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources" Ellis (2018, 12).

As Ellis further explicates:

> "The [task-as] workplan does not include any presentation of the language needed to perform the task, although it may supply input that can be 'borrowed' during the performance of the task. Learners need to draw on their existing linguistic resources (potentially both L1 and L2) and their non-linguistic resources (e.g. gesture; facial expressions) for comprehension and/or production" (Ellis 2018, 12)."

Within TBLL, the teacher has to monitor how their task-as-workplan unfolds in action and they act as moderator to ensure that learners rely on their own resources to an acceptable degree (e.g. by providing just enough scaffolding, but not too much). Within digital gameplay, the game's programing offers fairly rigid constraints on player action that a teacher would be hard-pressed to influence. The learner is in control of their progression through the game and the teacher typically can not easily intervene in (or, for that matter, easily monitor) the interaction that takes place between the learner and the gameworld.

In evaluating games, we can try to anticipate the range of linguistic and non-linguistic resources needed to work through the game – this might include an evaluation of resources needed while playing the game, and the resources that might be used to progress in the game 'outside' of the gameworld (e.g. by having learners consult forums, walkthroughs, guides, *Let's Plays*). In Ellis' version of TBLL (which is grounded in communicative approaches to language

learning[89]), the focus for scaffolds is on linguistic and non-linguistic resources; from a literacies perspective, we might consider re-framing these as 'semiotic resources' and consider what specific 'discourse practices' are engaged in during play – a view that engages more concretely with the multimodal and digital context of play. This approach acknowledges that linguistic resources are rarely isolated from discourse practices which leverage these resources in combination with other modalities within the semiotic domain of the gameworld – which is particularly true in vernacular games where gameworlds are multimodally rich by design.[90]

4.1.6. Engagement

The activity engages learners' interest (Willis & Willis)

In terms of tasks engaging learners' interest, Willis & Willis argue:

> "without engagement, without genuine interest, there can be no focus on meaning or outcome. Learners have to want to achieve an outcome, they have to want to engage in meaning." (Willis & Willis 2007, 13).

Games are often described as motivating by design but, as has been addressed earlier in this dissertation, this is an expectation prone to frustration (See Chapter 1.1.1., see also Chapter 5.1.3.). There are so many kinds of digital play and learners enjoy different kinds of games. Additionally, by dragging a vernacular game into the formal context of the classroom and wrapping it in activity that aligns play with learning can ultimately be demotivating. To refer to a common metaphor in games-based learning literature: If in designing games specifically for learning in the classroom, we end up with a chocolate-covered broccoli problem, then in bringing vernacular games into the classroom, we may just be trading this in for a broccoli-covered chocolate problem.

On the other hand, this is an issue that is common to all sorts of 'authentic' media and activity that learners may be exposed to in the classroom. My perspective here is that, yes, a well-chosen game approached within supportive methodological designs as serves appropriate learning objectives and processes could be motivating for learners; Just as a poorly-chosen game

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[89] Ellis condones an approach that combines perspectives of SLA, a communicative approach and a sociocultural approach to language education and language education research (See Ellis 2018).

[90] In contrast to games that are typically designed for learning (e.g. *The Phrasal Verb Machine; Kahoot;* see Chapter 3.2.1.) which are more likely to engage in working with isolated linguistic forms and communicative resources and are therefore are more 'exercise-like'.

using ill-matched designs including target learning objectives and processes that are difficult or impossible to meet is more likely to de-motivate. As also iterated by Jonathon Reinhardt, what is perhaps most important to learner motivation is coherent pedagogic framing, rather than the motivational value of the game on its own (Reinhardt 2019, 151). It bears mentioning here that how engaging a task or game may be is not *inherent* to the task or game itself – but is reliant on the implementation of coherent instructional designs that are sensitive to the educational context and the people who ultimately make use of them.

4.2. Mapping the playscape of narrative digital games as task environments

As stated in Chapter 4.1.1, games can be regarded as task *environments* versus as individual tasks.[91] While there are games that have a narrow enough scope that they could be played as an individual task, this is mostly the case with relatively closed games that feature an *emergence* based game structure, an iterative play style and perhaps a lack of narrative. Narrative games, however, can be more or less expansive in terms of the variety and meaningfulness of actions that players can undertake in them. In *Blackbar,* the only game mechanic is guessing words that have been censored from the game's letters; in *Heaven's Vault,* players engage in discussions with NPCs, explore game locations, find and decode word puzzles, solve point-and-click-style puzzles, and choose where to navigate in the larger gameworld.; in a Triple-A game like *Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom (TOTK)*, players have an expansive open world that requires significant open-ended exploration and which can be engaged with as a sandbox (e.g. using the building mechanics of the game to create interesting creations) rather than to fulfil the extremely wide range of sub- and core objectives explicitly set by the game. In considering these games as task environments for the language classroom, some observations can be made:

- The activities made possible by the game may more or less align with desirable learning aims in EFL (e.g. hitting enemies with a sword vs. navigating a dialogue);
- Even where game activities align with learning objectives and processes of TEFL in initially learning how to play a game (i.e. the initial *orientation gap* that features as learners figure out how to act in/converse with the gameworld), with further automatization of

[91] That being said, there are games with a limited enough scope that they could indeed be regarded as one task rather than a task environment. This is particularly true though for social non-narrative games, e.g. *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*.

play processes this can decreasingly be the case: e.g. at the beginning of a game, navigating between game menus might require focused engagement with the language featured in these menus, but once these meanings have been understood and no longer need to be actively negotiated, these elements are backgrounded by other play processes and, as such, there may be a point of diminishing returns in terms of direct engagement with the target language. This is generally true where games feature *iterative play* in their core mechanics (see Chapters 2.3.2. and 3.3.1.).

- Some activities are essential to gameplay (must be done in order to advance), others are optional (can be skipped or ignored, e.g. skipping through a cutscene or dialogue);
- Learner-players may spend different amounts of time on different activities, can prioritize games goals as they like, can contribute their own goals to play, and may additionally find workarounds (e.g. by using online game guides);
- In games where players have a large degree of freedom in terms of which play actions to prioritize, there is potential for a large gap between how different players experience the game and the competencies that they utilize through play.

Within these observations, it is clear that this is a lot of unpredictability for educators to navigate – Although perhaps not so dissimilar from the complexity educators navigate in task work in general where success in meeting learning objectives is a question of both effective anticipatory designs (task-as-workplan) and improvisational moderation (task-as-action).[92] Effective evaluation of gameworlds as task environments can be supportive in creating better anticipatory designs for working with a game in the classroom, including concerns such as the following:

a) Deciding whether or not to have learners play a game for its task environment at all:

Simply put: if the game does not meet enough of the criteria for functioning as a task environment that resonates with the learning objectives of the TEFL classroom (including a literacies-informed and task-based approach), then there may be no need to play the game as a task environment. One may still want to play the game – or work with game excerpts – to fulfill purposes better suited within another methodological frame (e.g. to aesthetically experience a text and articulate individual responses to it; see Chapters 5 & 6).

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[92] See also structural vs. procedural scaffolds in Walqui 2006; also 'macro', 'meso' and 'micro' scaffolds in Van Lier 2007, 60.

b) Selecting arrangements of play:

Such arrangements might include *extensive play* (playing a longer game for a longer time, perhaps from beginning to end), *intensive play* (playing a short game or parts of a long game in shorter bursts without the intention of ever finishing the game through play), and *co-playing* (playing a game designed as a single player game together – e.g. by sharing one input device). *Extensive play* is likely feasible and desirable when the task environment features extended and goal-oriented negotiation of meaning and where learner-players are likely to stay 'on task' through the bulk of the game. If a game does not seem particularly feasible in terms of *extensive play*, *intensive play* is perhaps still a possibility where certain parts of the game qualify as especially task-like (or as is appropriate to working with the game through another methodological frame – e.g. as an expressive text where even briefly playing a game can give learners insight as to the aesthetic 'feel' of a game; See Chapter 5). *Co-playing* can be useful to externalize and cooperatively address the negotiations of meaning that take place through gameplay.

c) Identifying where wraparound activities, materials, tasks can best support, supplement and extend the task environment of the game:

Wraparound activities have been defined as "learning tasks or pedagogically-mediated activities designed to supplement the tasks and activities built into a game" (Sykes and Reinhardt 2013, 142). Wraparound activities can be supportive in focusing learner attention (Reinhardt 2019, 9), in articulating learner roles while they engage in classroom play (e.g. playing as a language learner, as a gamer, as a role-player, as a critic), in bridging complexity, meeting learning objectives, fostering cooperative play and extending the task environment of the game into the task environment of the classroom. This will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 4.3.

In mapping the playscape of the diverse task environments offered by vernacular, largely single-player, narrative digital games, I will now tie back to the ludonarrative framework as presented in Chapter 3. This is seen as supportive in determining what aspects of a game will require evaluation as task environments according to their ludonarrative qualities.

4.2.1. The task environment of borderline narratives and borderline games

Games with incidental narrativity and narratives with incidental ludicity are not the core concern of this dissertation. Nonetheless, the observations here have implications for evaluating the

games that belong to the ludonarrative categories that are at the core concern of this dissertation, and so it is productive to consider them briefly here:

a) Digital narratives with no or low ludicity

This category of the ludonarrative framework is least relevant to the current discussion since user activity in interaction with these texts is the least likely to even qualify as task-like. This is due to the fact that they lack a goal to work towards and/or challenges that make moving forward difficult and requiring of deliberate action on the part of the user. User activity relating to the way a text is navigated (like flipping pages of a book) may be quite playful and aesthetically relevant to the text, but these mechanics do not challenge the user in the way a game would. Any task-orientation here would occur *around* the text – which aligns such media more closely with the 'expressive text' (Chapter 5) and 'cultural discourse' (Chapter 6) frames that will follow.

That being said, a task frame can still provide orientation for educators trying to establish which digital narratives even fall into this category: i.e. If the narrative does not have a goal-orientation and can be navigated at leisure versus with significant effort, then even a text that is marketed as a game, such as *Florence*, should be evaluated from this position of the framework. This is mostly clarifying in knowing that other methodological frames will perhaps be more supportive in taking up such a text in the classroom.

b) Digital games with no or low narrativity

To reiterate, these games feature either no narrative elements (e.g. *Tetris*) or include narrative elements, such as settings and characters (e.g. *Super Mario*), but without significant narrative progression (i.e. a story, consisting of more than one or two novel events, and organized meaningfully, i.e. within a narrative discourse).

Games can be task-like with little to no narrative and, indeed, the task frame that is the focus of this chapter is likely to be sufficient when evaluating these games for the TEFL classroom. In doing so, one must look at how the various game activities offered to the player within the game align with TEFL learning objectives and processes. Games whose task environments will fare poorly within this evaluative frame include:

- **Sensorimotoric games** (platformers, sport games, arcade games like *Pong* or *Space Invaders*) which rely on players physically offering inputs in a timely manner: e.g. pressing buttons to jump at the right moment such as in classic *Super Mario* platformer; performing the right arm movement in a dancing game like *Just Dance;* hitting the ball with the paddle at the right time in *Pong*.

- **Non-language-based logic puzzles**, such as *Sudoku*, *Tangram*, *Chess*.
  Such games *could* still be used in the task-based classroom, but only in so far as the educator has designed a wraparound task for the game that extends into the task environment of the classroom, e.g. one person has control of a *Tangram* game, the other person a picture of the completed *Tangram*. The second person describes the image and the other player can only place pieces on their digital board in line with their partner's prompts (i.e. an information gap task). Here, the game is being leveraged as a tool (Stannard & von Blanckenburg 2018) much in the same way that an analogue Tangram kit could be used – but the game is not a task environment in and of itself.

Games that would work well within a task-based framework for the classroom will be those games that feature classic communicative gaps as understood by Ellis (2018). For example:

- **Multiplayer party games** which can potentially feature all kinds of communicative gap. For example, in *Keep talking and nobody explodes,* one player has to disarm a simulated digital bomb while the other players provide instructions from a bomb defusal manual (information gap). Or *Patently Stupid* where players have to design inventions based on prompts from their teammates and sell their ideas in a mini-presentation. Players rank each other's contributions in order to determine a winner (opinion gap). Or *Among Us*, a *Werewolf*-style social-deduction game where players have to deduce who is the killer and then come to a consensus on who should be expelled from the ship (information, reasoning and opinion gap).
- **Multiplayer action/tactical games**: In these games, players have to coordinate their approach in attacking targets (as is typical of popular game genres such as shooters, MMORPGs or turn-based and real-time strategy games). The amount of language being generated between players could be quite variable depending on the game and on the people who are teamed together. Indeed, in certain action heavy games, succinct communication is sometimes the most effective for achieving game goals, and so there could be diminishing returns in the use of these games as task environments.
- **Language puzzlers**: In truth, many of these games would not qualify as tasks per se, but as language exercises since the use of forms is divorced from a context that attends to meaning. For example, games like *Wordle* or *Words with Friends*. These could perhaps qualify as a kind of form-focused language practice, but not as tasks. *Scribblenauts* is an example that features *some* task-based word play (but not in all its levels). For example, in

one level you are tasked with helping a knight cross a river and have to input words to generate an object that will get the job done (e.g. 'a long bridge', 'a jetpack', 'wings').

- **Management simulations** which feature reasoning gaps. For example, in *Democracy 3*, the player plays as the head of government of a simulated country and must adjust governing policies in order to keep society functioning while still winning elections in subsequent terms. In balancing popular policies (which provide political capital) against policies that maintain social stability, the learner is exposed to highly specialized language relating to governance. The only issue with management sims is that the gameplay is quite iterative and so there can be a point of diminishing returns once the language underpinning the interfaces of the game has been acquired. This can be helped by co-playing the game, where multiple learners play the game together and must come to a consensus (i.e. opinion & reasoning gap) on actions taken within the game. This is especially a possibility in games where the mechanics are not too involved, as would be the case for a game such as *Civilization VI* which has an especially high learning curve and where games run especially long (which is not to say this would be impossible, but would require a significant time investment in terms of class time and preparation).

Even though such games can be a good fit for the classroom as concerns their alignment with task-based learning objectives and processes, these games are still authentic media that can require a steep time investment to master and can vary widely in terms of their complexity – as relates to both language use and gameplay mechanics. Complex games will likely still require wraparound materials and activities to account for this complexity and to provide pedagogic framing that assists learners in connecting play to their own learning processes (Reinhardt 2019).

Questions that can be asked of games in this category:

- Does game activity qualify as task-like based on established criteria (e.g. Ellis 2018, Willis & Willis 2007)?
- If not, can game activity be made into a task through additional classroom activity (e.g. through co-playing)?
- If no to both of the previous questions, then playing the game within a task-based frame is perhaps unfeasible. Consider other methodological frames (see Chapter 5 and 6).

4.2.2. The task environment of games featuring complementary ludonarrativity

As discussed in Chapter 3.3.1., in games that predominantly feature complementary ludonarrativity, narrative progression and (often iterative) gameplay tends to alternate – with the bulk of playtime often being taken up by iterative play. On the one hand, the non-narrative or narrative-adjacent gameplay can be evaluated similarly to games with no narrative. On the other hand, one has to attend to the fact that such games frequently feature a greater range of action within a more expansive gameworld, as is seen to extremes in e.g. open-world adventures. To revisit a table from Chapter 3.3.3. of this dissertation (see Table 10 below):

Table 10: Player action in entangled and complementary ludonarrativity

<table>
<tr><th>Entangled ludonarrativity ← → Complementary ludonarrativity</th><th colspan="2"></th></tr>
<tr><td>Player Action that Contributes to Narrative Progression</td><td colspan="2">Player Action that Complements or is Adjacent to Narrative Progression (see 'Ludonarrative Resonance')</td></tr>
<tr><td>Doing the story</td><td colspan="2">Being in character</td></tr>
<tr><td>Actions less iterative: always leads to negotiation of new meanings (as tied to novel events that are part of the overarching story)</td><td colspan="2">Actions more likely to be iterative:
Intensive negotiation of meaning features especially in the first iterations as players find orientation in the game, but actions become routine or automatized over time. Can contribute to a sense of narrative immersion, even when the narrative itself is not progressing.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Performing Narrative Events:
Direct participation in narrative progression and ludonarrative discourse through play. Can involve making meaningful narrative choices and/or having to piece together narrative information from diverse game elements.</td><td>Character Routines:
Being in and engaging with the larger gameworld. Such engagements can contribute new meaning (e.g. fleshing out the gameworld and game lore) but do not equate to narrative progression.</td><td>Player Automatizations:
Practicing and getting better at recurring game challenges to the point that they can be met easily (and tactically, when needed).</td></tr>
</table>

As seen above, complementary ludonarratives[93] largely feature routine and automatized action that can be more or less resonant with the gameworld while not contributing to narrative progression directly. Each kind of action featured in the playscape of a game may have more or less relevance to TEFL learning objectives and processes. In mapping the playscape of

[93] Reminder: Complementary ludonarratives can still feature elements of entangled ludonarrativity (involving player action as described in the first column of Table 10 above), but the bulk of play activity falls in the latter two columns.

complementary ludonarratives as task environments for the EFL classroom, the following evaluative considerations can provide further orientation (see Table 11):

Table 11: Evaluative considerations and interventions for complementary ludonarratives

a) Determining whether a game features predominantly complementary ludonarrativity	
Ask yourself the following: Can I separate the narrative from the gameplay and watch/listen/read it through (e.g. watch all the cutscenes in a row) and the narrative is comprehensible and generally entertaining? Could I replace parts of the gameplay with different gameplay (replace one puzzle for another kind of puzzle; change it from tactics-style play to action-adventure style play) and the change would have little to no impact on the narrative? When significant narrative events occur, am I mostly watching/reading/hearing these events depicted to me in a more or less linear fashion? i.e. I feel like I am 'on a track'.	If more yes than no, read on. If unsure, consider the evaluative considerations here alongside those for entangled ludonarrativity in the following section of this dissertation. (Reminder: Even where narrative and gameplay shift back and forth, narrative and gameplay can still be thematically resonant with one another contributing to cohesion and a sense of immersion in the gameworld. Such resonances can be explored further in the 'narrative game as expressive text' frame, see Chapter 5)
b) Addressing iterative play	
How much gameplay is spent on actions that repeat again and again (iterative play) versus on actions that involve a negotiation of new meanings? When gameplay is iterative, does it qualify as language practice?	If a game features extensive iterative play which equates to more automitization of action rather than active negotiation of meaning, there could be diminishing returns in playing this game *extensively* – particularly where such iterative action does not equate to language practice.
c) Addressing freedom of action	
How diverse is the range of activity in a particular game? How easy is it for a player to deviate from the core game goals as established in the game? Or to play according to their own goals within the game? How aligned is game activity to TEFL relevant learning processes, whether from a classical communicative perspective or from a literacies-informed discourse perspective?	These questions relate to how much intervention would be needed to keep learners 'on task': i.e. focused on TEFL-relevant play. Where learners staying 'on task' is feasible without extensive intervention on the part of the educator, then *extensive,* as well as *intensive play* is probably appropriate with this game. Otherwise, a combination of *intensive play* with more involved wraparound activities is likely needed. Where keeping learners 'on task' is especially exhaustive or impossible for the bulk of time spent playing the game, the game may be deemed as unsuitable for play within a task-based frame.

In addressing the last set of questions in the table above, it can be helpful to perform a 'task budget' in addition to the 'ludonarrative budget' that was proposed in Chapter 3.3.3. to assist in mapping the playscape of complementary ludonarratives as task environments:

Firstly, consider the range of action available inside of a game. Which actions are resonant with TEFL learning objectives – in terms of practicing communicative competencies,

but also in terms of active negotiation of meaning within the gameworld? Consider which of these actions are essential to progression in the game and which ones are an optional element of play. For example, see Figure 8:

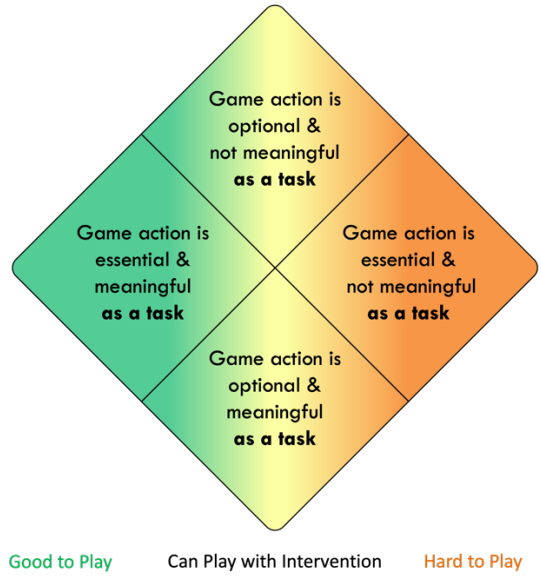

Figure 8: Task budget of possible game actions

The different coloured zones of the diamond above correspond to the following:

- **Green zone:** Activities here can be engaged in as a task in the language classroom without much outside intervention on the part of the educator. If a lot of the game activities fall here, then this suggests that it is highly feasible to bring this game into the classroom and to *play* it in the classroom as a 'task environment', perhaps even extensively;
- **Yellow zone:** Whatever activity falls here would likely need to be controlled for by the educator. In other words, pedagogic framing in the form of "wraparound activities" can help to minimize learner engagement with less relevant gameplay and/or focus learner engagement with more relevant gameplay according to treating the game as a 'task environment';
- **Red zone:** Any activity falling here is a barrier to the usefulness of playing such a game in the language classroom within a 'task environment' frame. If proportionally speaking, the green outweighs the red, then this might be an acceptable inconvenience. Otherwise, educators might have to consider whether to instead engage with this game within

another frame – i.e. as an 'expressive text' (Chapter 5) or as 'cultural discourse' (Chapter 6).

If a game does not seem particularly feasible in terms of *extensive play*, *intensive play* is perhaps still a possibility: This involves briefly playing a game with the intention of giving learners insight as to the aesthetic 'feel' of a game (beyond what can be derived from screenshots and screen recordings), but where the bulk of work with a game would then still take place outside of gameplay.

To give an example of a 'task budget' in action, we can compare three of the games mentioned in the previous sub-chapter: *Blackbar, Heaven's Vault, and Legend of Zelda TOTK:*

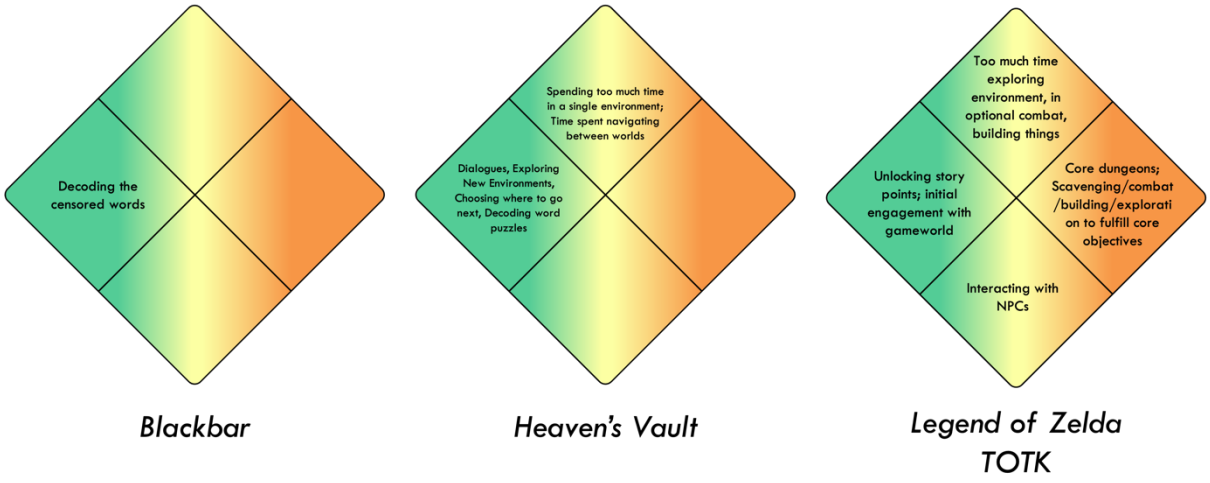

Figure 9: Task budget of possible game actions in *Blackbar*, *Heaven's Vault*, and *Legend of Zelda: TOTK*

Based on what we can see here, *Blackbar* is a good candidate for extensive play without much intervention on the part of the educator (which isn't to say that intervention is not still desirable in extending the task environment of the game into the task environment of the classroom; see Chapter 4.2.). *Heaven's Vault* is also a good candidate, but might require additional wraparound activities to keep learners 'on task'. *Legend of Zelda: TOTK* is a fairly terrible candidate for *extensive play*, but this is made worse when one considers not just the diversity of action allowed by the game, but the proportion of time that is likely to be spent in these different zones. Which leads to the second part of the task budget. As illustrated below:

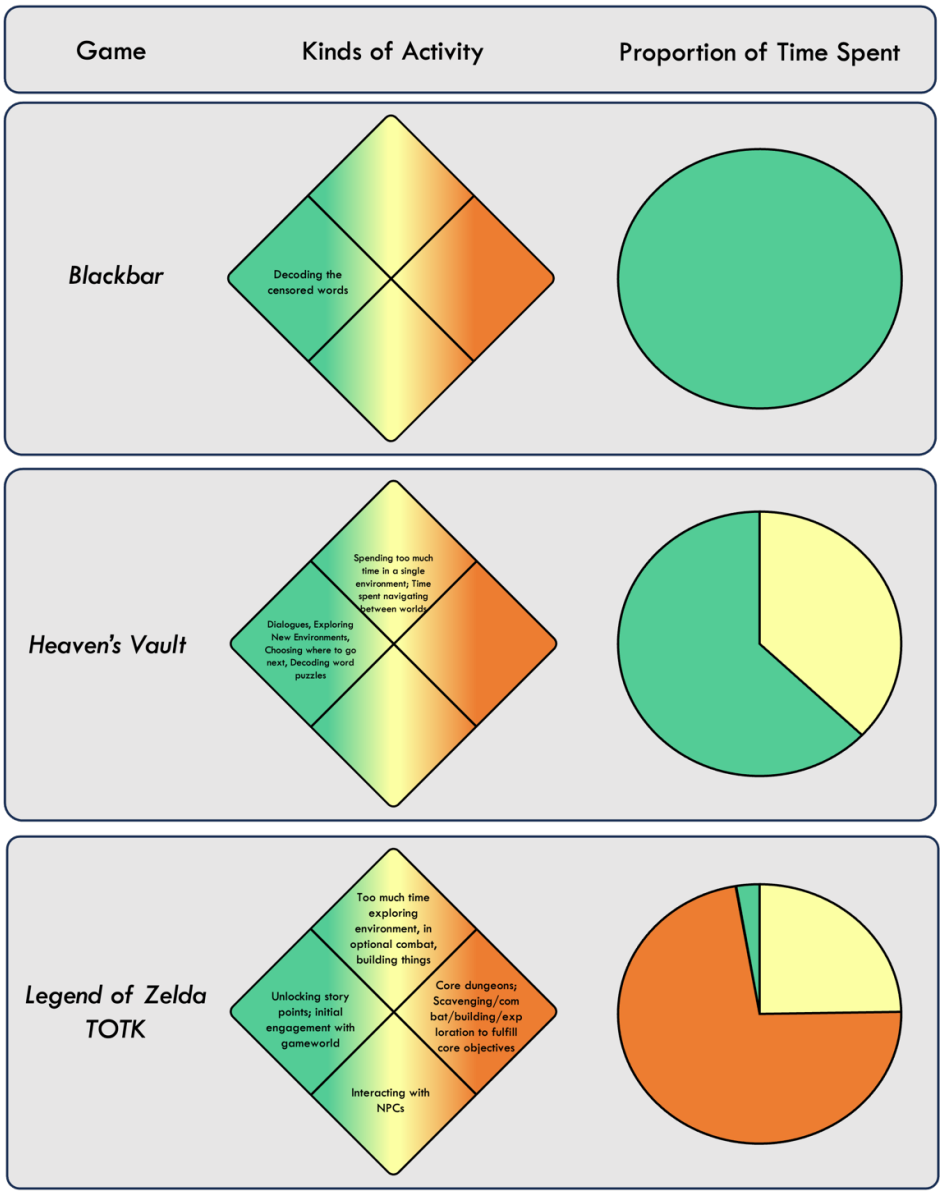

Figure 10: Task budget of possible game actions including proportion of time potentially spent on these game actions in *Blackbar*, *Heaven's Vault*, and *Legend of Zelda: TOTK*

The pie charts above are approximated breakdowns of how time that could be spent playing these games. In truth, particularly where games offer significant freedom of action, different players with different play styles and experience with the medium would have a different breakdown. The above is only meant to give an impression of the potential balance of activity in a particular game. To get a feeling for how variable play can be in a game, it can be helpful to use a tool such as the website, *HowLongToBeat.com*, which roughly documents how long players may take to beat a game. For example:

- Blackbar: 1.5 Hours to beat

- Heaven's Vault: 15.5 - 36 Hours to beat
- Zelda TOTK: 58 Hours - 218 Hours to beat
  (*howlongtobeat.com*, accessed 29.06.2023)

The greater the range of time, then either the game offers significant freedom of action (at the extreme ends, offering options for sports-like or sandbox-like play, which can be endless) or features gameplay that increases the game's re-playability (e.g. where by playing the full game multiple times, the player gains access to additional play challenges and/or narrative experiences). Time spent "on task" needs to be especially interrogated in complementary ludonarratives – despite good storytelling, the gameplay which takes up the bulk of the time may be only tenuously related to EFL-relevant competencies and learning processes. The inherent "task environment" of the game could then be insufficient to EFL purposes (but perhaps still valuable within another methodological frame – see Chapters 5 and 6).

4.2.3. The task environment of games featuring entangled ludonarrativity

As introduced in Chapter 3.3.2., entangled ludonarratives feature a tight relationship between the game as a 'text' and as 'task'. In other words, engaging with the task environment of the game is equivalent to participating in the narrative discourse of the game. Of particular interest in addressing these games as task environments are the ludonarrative gaps that can be confronted both through gameplay and in the extended task environment of the classroom, as depicted in Table 12 below. Some of these gaps are general to all games, others (marked by *) are especially prominent in games featuring entangled ludonarrativity:

Table 12: Ludonarrative gaps as negotiations of meaning in digital games

	Within the Game	**Around the Game**
Information Gaps	**Familiarization with the semiotic domain of the game** –Confronting the unknown through exploration. Discovering how to unlock and interact with the mechanics of the game. Finding orientation within the possibility space of this particular gameworld and learning how to act in it; i.e. *discoursing* within the game's semiotic domain; Gee 2015 ***(Orientation Gap).***	**Sharing different play experiences and providing play support** – What happened in your game versus in mine? ***(Experience Gap),*** How can I/we solve this puzzle? How can I/we move forward? Resolving this collaboratively, but also looking for solutions elsewhere (e.g. online forums).
Reasoning Gaps	**Solving game puzzles** –particularly convenient are those that involve the target language or that are tied to the narrative situation of the game; ***Figuring out how to navigate, unlock, participate in the game's narrative** – Can be quite variable depending on the game. For instance: *A Normal Lost Phone:* Searching through the phone for clues in order to unlock more content by e.g. finding a password for unlocking internet access in the phone's archive of text messages; *Heaven's Vault* and *Blackbar:* Decoding the language puzzles that are tied to story beats; *Obra Dinn:* Deducing what happened to the ship's occupants through engaging with audio clips and 3D-tableaus of the game's scrambled narrative moments.	**Solving game puzzles through co-play** – including those that do not include linguistic signs *per se;* ***Figuring out how to navigate, unlock, participate in the narrative together** – Playing the game in groups and reasoning through these same narrative puzzles together. Players can be encouraged to hypothesize together outside of gameplay before trying out their hypotheses in the game.
Opinion Gaps	***Configuring a narrative** – especially in games that involve making meaningful choices and role playing. E.g. by creating a character with a particular set of abilities or by choosing between narrative options (exercising "projective identity" à la Gee 2003) (e.g. *Disco Elysium*, *Stanley's Parable).*	***Comparing what choices made, why such choices were made, what makes these choices meaningful** –Furthermore, evaluating the consequences of choices and what this indicates regarding the worldview of the game. Sharing interpretations of ludic and narrative themes. ***(Experience Gap + Ludic Narrative Competence, see Chapter 5.2.3.).***

The gaps above are indicative of gameplay and narrative play which involve significant negotiation of meaning – as this is understood within a literacies-informed perspective on TBLL. It is, of course, convenient for the language classroom when such negotiations of meaning inside of a game involve linguistic signs and the target language, but even where this is not the case, such games offer a richness of meaning that can be exploited within the 'task environment of the classroom' facilitated through supportive wraparound activities. This involves a bridging of the 'task environment' frame with that of the 'expressive text' and 'cultural discourse frames' (see Chapters 5 & 6). Engaging with ludonarrative gaps is then also tied into the particularities of a game as a distinct expressive and cultural text. In terms of the difference between working with

complementary ludonarratives as task environments and entangled ludonarratives as task environments:

- With complementary ludonarratives – particularly those of the more expansive variety – many of the necessary interventions involve focusing learner attention on the bits of gameplay that are TEFL-relevant while minimizing attention on the bits of gameplay that are not TEFL-relevant. It involves wraparound activities and materials that further constrain learner action within the gameworld and involves having learners perform non-gameplay related actions that are specific to learners' role as learners (versus as gameplayers);
- With entangled ludonarratives – which due to their narrative focus also feature more authorial constraint, focused gameplay and shorter run times – the games are brimming with opportunities to negotiate meaning within the already constrained semiotic domain of the gameworld. The focus of wraparound activities and materials with such games may be less based on imposing outside constraints on player action inside of the game, and more on using wraparound activities to meaningfully extend the processes of play and of negotiation of meaning into the task environment of the classroom.

This will be explored in greater detail in the following section, including as applies to examples of specific ludonarratives games.

4.3. Designs for the task environments of gameworld and of classroom in *intra-action*

The semiotic domain (and task environment) of the game is always connected to the semiotic domains (and task environment) of the wider world. This is true even in informal play contexts: If I play a game and confront a problem I cannot solve inside of the game, I will ask for help – perhaps from friends and family who also play such games or by tapping into online 'affinity spaces' (Gee 2003); Screenshots and screen recordings that I take of my gameplay can be shared online; I can watch how other people are playing a game either before or after I purchase a game for myself. In other words, players of games are already likely to engage in task-like behaviours surrounding a game as this relates to choosing games to play, helping other players, getting help themselves, maximizing their playstyle, creating new content – such as fan fiction, memes, commentary, and so on (see also Chapter 6.2.). Roger Dale Jones, in adopting a discourse perspective towards digital games in TEFL, refers to digital games as "multilayered dynamic discourse" in describing the ways these domains (the game, the player, the world) inform one another:

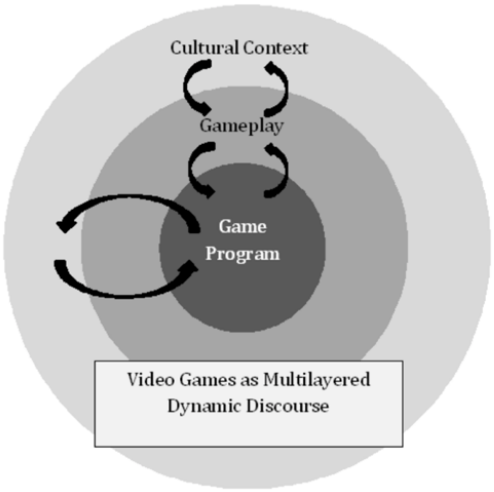

Figure 11: Video Games as Multilayered Dynamic Discourse (Jones 2018, 46)

In calling for this dynamic to be represented in digital game engagement in the classroom, Jones asks for educators to "recognize the multivocality of the cultural discourse on games to include gamer discourse, and see such discourse as adding to the complexity of problem solving, world building, socialization and learning that is involved in VGL [video game literacy]" (Jones 2018, 35). In this vein, when engaging with games as task environments we must also always consider how the 'task environment of the game' might *intra-act* with the 'task environment of the classroom' and of the wider world, and how, in fact, the task environment of the classroom might be designed to better *intra-act* with that of the game (see Figure 12):

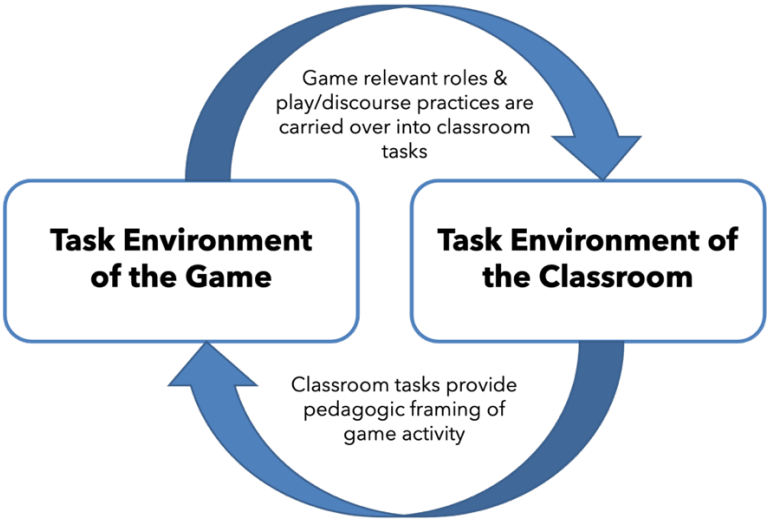

Figure 12: Possible intra-action of task environment of game and task environment of classroom

In bridging the task environment of the game with that of the classroom and of the wider world, I propose that it can be helpful to consider what *role* learners are asked to take on in relation to game media. What follows are three perspectives for bridging the task environment of the game with the task environment of the classroom based on the following roles for learners engaging in task-based play:

a) ***Learner-Players as Language Learners:*** Activities that provide explicit pedagogic framing of game activity as relates to TEFL-specific learning objectives (i.e. competencies as formulated in the *Bildungsstandards/LeahrplanPLUS*);
b) ***Learner-Players as Gamers:*** Recruiting **game cultural roles** into the classroom – i.e. having learners participate in gamer discourses as participants in gamer discourse communities (as gamers, spectators, commentators, critics, curators, community architects and designers; e.g. within a notion of *Diskurfähigkeit*, see Hallet 2002; see also Chapter 6.2.);
c) ***Learner-Players as Player-Characters:*** Projecting **gameplay roles** into the classroom – i.e. externalizing, simulating, extending game activity into the interactional context of the classroom as learners maintain game-relevant roles (e.g. the player-character).

This discussion will be followed up by a closer look at what wraparound activities within these roles might look like especially in games featuring entangled ludonarrativity.

a) Learner-Players as Language Learners

There are two considerations to address here: first, using wraparound activities and materials to serve as pedagogic framing of game tasks which involves making it explicit to learners e.g. the communicative learning goals that we want the game to help us achieve through play. Second, using games as content, especially for purposes of cultural and textual learning.

Up until now, the notion of wraparound activities has been briefly defined. To now take a closer look: *Wraparound activities* are "learning tasks or pedagogically-mediated activities designed to supplement the tasks and activities built into a game" (Sykes and Reinhardt 2013, 142) and which "enhance and focus learner attention" (Reinhardt 2019, 9). This involves being up front with learners that *parts* of their gameplay are seen to be especially useful for meeting TEFL-specific learning objectives and learning processes and supports learners in focusing their play for these purposes. Reinhardt argues that due to the participatory nature of games in comparison to other media, wraparound activities are essential for promoting "learnful awareness of the game as a learning resource" (Reinhardt 2019, 144). It involves educators evaluating games for what can be taken up in *explicit learning*, rather than relying on autonomous, incidental learning to occur through play. Reinhardt further explains:

> "an activity might ask the player to contextualize the vocabulary learned in the game in an invented sentence or integrate it into story, or extend a game narrative about a particular game character into a fan fiction story. Wraparound activities can balance the focus of what the vernacular game offers; for example, if a game requires reading comprehension but no writing or speaking (as many do), a complementary activity might practice writing and speaking" (ibid., 144)

The focusing effect of wraparound activities is especially useful when working with games that offer significant freedom of action in helping learners to stay 'on task' with their gameplay (i.e. in games that feature quite a bit of action in the yellow and red-zone of the task budget as discussed in Chapter 4.2.2.).

In reaching outside of just communicative competencies, games can also be leveraged for their thematic content and expressive value which affords a negotiation of meaning outside of gameplay. This will be addressed more extensively in subsequent chapters in considering games as expressive texts (Chapter 5) and as cultural discourse (Chapter 6).

b) Learner-Players as Gamers: Recruiting gamer roles into the classroom

This involves learners becoming competent in discourse practices that are apart of digital game cultures. Digital games cultures can feature a wide range of roles, such as gamer, spectator, collector, curator, commentator, critic, community member, leader or architect, and game designer. Within this view learners are asked to engage in game relevant but game external discourse practices and communities – which might involve tasks such as writing/taping game guides, creating *Let's Plays*, providing help to other players on online forums, reviewing games, creating fan fiction. As this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.2., this will not be treated in further here. However, this perspective aligns with Wolfgang Hallet's notion of *Diskursfähigkeit* which asserts that learners are not just language users 'in waiting' but can be regarded as active participants in discourse domains outside of their classroom-bounded roles as learners (Hallet 2002; Hallet 2013) and Jones' consideration of *Diskurfähigkeit* as specifically relates to game literacies for the formal language learning classroom (Jones 2018).

c) Learner-Players as Player-Characters: Extending gameplay roles into the classroom

Whereas the first categories cast the learner in a role that is external to the game (e.g. the role of a language learner, a gamer, critic, creator), this category involves projecting the learner's player-character role into the classroom. In other words, it involves creating tasks that have a learner 'stay in character' while conducting activity in the classroom. As what would be possible here is highly dependent on the narrative and play style of individual games, it demands some

degree of creativity on the part of the educator or materials designer, but has potential to invite game-specific negotiations of meaning into the interactional context of the classroom.

Below, I have provided some examples of what such activity might look like, followed by a more detailed look at how some of these techniques could be applied using the example of the game *Her Story*. It is argued that these techniques are especially useful in relation to the use of entangled ludonarratives or constrained (in terms of length or potential player action) complementary ludonarratives as these are especially rich in opportunities to negotiate meaning through play both in the game and outside of the game (see also Chapter 7.2.):

Table 13: Example activities for recruiting game roles into the TEFL classroom

Activity	**Description**
Orientation: Who are you? Where are you?	Learners are confronted with the game interface and/or are asked to briefly play the beginning of a game and are asked to consider: 'Who are you? Where are you? How do you know?' This is especially effective in games where the player-character does not have an avatar and where 'who you are' must entirely be derived in relation to other elements on the screen (e.g. *Her Story, A Normal Lost Phone, Blackbar, Bury me, my love*). It can be made clear that all gameplay/classroom activity that follows from this point will engage with the learners in this role that they have identified for themselves.
Externalize It: The Game Journal	Games often feature a digital journal which can include all kinds of information that support the player on their journey (e.g. a record of what has happened in the game so far, maps, currently available quests, glossaries and game lore, configuration screens which allow players to configure the gameplay or their character characteristics). Learners can be given an analogue version (or a digital version that is still separate from the game, e.g. using an app like *Book Creator* or *OneNote*) to collect information and media or to use for notetaking that is supportive of gameplay. Learners can be tasked to remain in character with their journal (i.e. recall game experiences in the form of a diary). Multimodal game journals (e.g. using an app like *Book Creator*) would also allow learners to record and reproduce screen shots and screen recordings from their gameplay. Journals – or parts of such journals – can also be filled in collaboratively (i.e. a group journal or whole class journal).
Externalize It: Game puzzles	Some game puzzles can also be completed in an analogue form. E.g. screenshots of *Blackbar* can be printed and players can attempt the puzzles on paper before checking their answers in the game. This can be useful at the beginning of play to focus attention and provide support before having learners engage in extended autonomous and digital play.
Externalize It: The Inventory	This works well with Point-and-Click Adventure or Escape Room style games which often feature an inventory that needs to be utilized by players to solve puzzles and unlock new events and areas of the game environment. Print out all the objects that find their way into the player's inventory in a playthrough (e.g. as flashcards) – items that might contain too many spoilers if printed this way can be marked with a question mark. In between play sessions, learners can go through the cards and hypothesize what the items might be used for; during playthroughs they can separate the items that have been used already; other teams of players may also peek at these cards to get hints as to what might be needed in their own playthroughs.
Externalize It: The Murder Board	The Murder Board is a trope of crime fiction in which characters in an investigative role pin headshots of people of interest and other bits of information onto a board; They then rearrange and draw connections between these elements as new information is learned. In games featuring a mystery (which does not need to involve a murder, despite the name), print off images of all the game characters and arrange

	them on a board. The class – or smaller groups – can also share a board as the game progresses and use it as a tool for communicating progress and for collectively reasoning through game mysteries in the classroom.
Taking photographs: The scrapbook / social media story	'Your character is creating a scrapbook (or: social media story) to share their adventures with friends: Take some screenshots to add to your scrapbook' Also note that in addition to taking screenshots the usual way, often games feature a picture taking feature where game characters pose for the camera, filters can be added, etc.. These images can then be worked with in further activities in class.
Taking photographs: The investigation	Your character is investigating something. Take pictures of meaningful moments and/or puzzles that you are struggling to solve to share with your fellow investigators (i.e. classmates) so you can reason through these problems together. Can be paired with 'The Murder Board'.
Collaborative Role-Playing: Co-play arrangements	*Co-playing* involves teams of learners playing a single-player game together. Depending on the game system, game and controller, this can look functionally quite different. Some game systems allow players to control one character with two controllers (the PS5's *assistive play*, Xbox's *co-pilot*); tablets can be tapped on by multiple people, but three could be a crowd; in other cases, players would have to negotiate who controls the controller at which time. It can be helpful to coordinate this sharing before play to avoid a situation where one player hogs the controller. This is likely to be less of an issue in games that feature little to no sensorimotor play. Whole class co-playing is also an option for certain games, where the teacher or an invited student has control of the game which is being projected onto a screen – an example of this will follow with the *Her Story* example below.
Collaborative Role-Playing: Share notes	Periodically stop the gameplay and have learners share notes of what they have learned so far. Especially effective in a game where a mystery has to be solved. The class in this case is cast as a 'guild' of 'detectives', 'researchers', 'explorers' – whatever collective role resonates with the gameworld. If learners were co-playing, groups can be scrambled after each note sharing session so learners can experience different collective play styles. In supporting other learners getting through game challenges, learners can create e.g. flashcards with hints on them which their classmates can make us of as needed (note: the teacher can also prepare these as a scaffolding measure).
Experience Gaps: Superlatives	In short games with multiple narrative paths, learners can be challenged to find the best, worst, funniest, weirdest, saddest, scariest etc. storyline. They then share what they found and can try to come to a consensus as to which storylines achieved which superlative status.
Experience Gaps: Recreate the story	Another approach for short games with multiple narrative paths is to have players try to recreate someone else's playthrough. In games featuring conditionals and variables that further complicate the branching nature of the narrative (see Chapter 2.3.2.), this can be especially difficult to achieve, for example, with *80 Days* or *Bury me, my love.*

One might note that many of the activities above would in fact fit into all three of these learner-player roles: For instance, in crafting a multimodal diary of play experiences, learners can be acting as learners, gamers and player-characters. However, in emphasizing the role of the player-character, the gameworld as a valued semiotic domain is especially immersively represented in the classroom. The Table 14 below illustrates a lesson outline of *Her Story* which uses some of these techniques:

Table 14: Piloted perspectives from practice I: A lesson sequence for playing *Her Story*

Context: What follows is a lesson sequence that I have piloted with both older school pupils (11th grade and up) and student teachers over several semesters both before and after the start of this dissertation project.
Materials and Equipment: A tablet for every group of 3 learners. Headphones for each pupil and an audio splitter for each tablet. An A3 piece of paper and markers for each group. A projector and adapter for projecting the tablet onto a shared screen.
Step 1: The game (which is available on tablets and PC) is connected to a projector. Learners are confronted with the starting screen: They see a computer screen with a program open. The program is a database and the word "MURDER" has been typed into the search bar. There are thumbnails of four videos that are ready to be played. The learners are prompted: "You are about to play this game. Based on what you see here… who are you? Where are you? How do you know?" Learners are asked to consider the screen: What are we looking at? ('A computer screen / a computer program / a database / a search bar' etc.). Which time period is the computer from? ('It's old.' / 'The 90's'). The program window can be dragged around the screen so learners can see the desktop behind it. The desktop background features a logo including the word "Constabulary". 'What is a constabulary?' ('a police station'). 'If this is a police computer, then what is this database used for?' 'What do you think these videos will be about?' Confirm what the group has established so far: It's a police computer, from a long time ago, there is a database of police videos, maybe interviews relating to a "murder" as this has been typed into the database's search bar. Based on all this information, learners are prompted again to consider who they are: 'If this is a police computer, then who do you think you are as the player-character?' (e.g. 'A detective.' 'A criminal.'). (Learners can be prompted to later look more closely at the other files and programs on the desktop which add further clues regarding the identity of the player-character and the core themes of the narrative.) **Step 2:** Learners are introduced more concretely to how the game works. "We have access to a police database which features police interviews with one woman who has something to do with a murder. If we search a particular word, we will be given access to videos that feature that word, but only the first five videos, so if you search a very common word you will only have access to earlier interviews." Learners are told that they will be investigating this story together and are asked to take out a pen and paper and to take notes of search terms they would like to search in the future based on the clips they are about the watch. The first four clips are played for the class. Ask the learners: "Why do you think this woman is being interviewed?' 'What words would you search next?' Learners can also be prompted to pay close attention to the visuals in the videos, including what the woman is wearing on different interview days or the metadata in the top-right hand corner of the video feed which reveals the date at which these interviews were conducted. **Step 3:** Learners are separated into groups of around 3 people. Each group is given a tablet (ideally with headphones and a splitter so that each group member can listen to the same tablet without disturbing the larger class). They are told that they will be given 20 minutes to play the game and find out as much as they can about the woman and how she is related to the murder. During this time, they have to search keywords, watch the associated video clips, take notes, discuss their theories and decide what they will search for next. As they learn key information, they can be asked to compile this on a Murder Board using the A3 pieces of paper shared by each group. Here they can also record the most important search terms they used to find this information. They are told that they will be sharing their Murder Boards with the larger group after these 20 minutes. **Step 4:** After the 20 minutes is up, learners are given 5 minutes to add last details to their Murder Boards. Either: the learners present their murder boards briefly (5 minutes) or, alternatively, the teacher can conduct a gallery walk where the different groups go from board to board and take note of things they may want to search during their next play session. **Repeat Steps 3 and 4** until you are satisfied with how much of the story the learners have unearthed. This can also be done over multiple class periods. **The twist:** If learners play the game long enough and discover enough of the more plot-heavy video clips, the screen will flicker and the reflection of the person playing the game (the avatar) flashes briefly on the screen. They may also receive a notification from other characters which gives further hints as to who the player's character is (spoiler: Not a detective!). Learners should record instances of this for further exploration later. **Concluding Step:** Each group prepares a 'final report' where they outline their main findings and theories. These are shared amongst the class and discussed for their feasibility and for what learners find makes the most engaging story.

In considering the competences that are engaged through gameplay in the example above: If someone were to play this game on their own, the TEFL-relevant task environment of the game primarily consists of viewing (and reading, if subtitles are turned on) and written note-taking. By expanding the task environment of the game into the classroom, additional competencies are incorporated into the gameplay: discussing theories, deciding on the next search terms, writing and presenting theories, comparing thoughts on the game. Since the narrative itself is somewhat resistant to narrative closure, there is significant potential in considering the game from the frame of 'games as expressive text' as well which will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

5. Narrative digital games as expressive texts

As established in Chapter 2.1.2., this dissertation privileges narrative games as *expressive* texts[94] – where their subjective, creative and aesthetic qualities are seen to be of particular value for language education. Within this view, games as expressive media are seen as cultural artefacts (Murray 2017a; Murray 2012) [95] and not just as tools for education or entertainment (Stannard 2022). Similarly, in her book, *Critical Play*, Mary Flanagan argues that games, like any other media, can be used as a "*medium of expression"* and are in possession of their own "representation systems and styles, rules of progress, codes of conduct, contexts of reception, winning and losing paradigms, ways of interacting in a game" (Flanagan 2009, 4). She argues that these are "the material properties of games" and "much like marble, or chisel or pen and ink bring with them their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions." (ibid., 4). As with e.g. literary and filmic learning in EFL, an exploration of texts involves engagement with the material properties and attendant expressive (also aesthetic) conventions specific to the medium at hand (e.g. literary devices, filmic devices) which facilitate an exploration of a text's themes and provide a more precise language with which learners can articulate their individual responses to a text within the larger interactional context of the language classroom (Surkamp & Nünning 2020, 25). The properties and devices specific to digital games would involve a consideration of how game mechanics are leveraged for expressive purposes. Notably, whereas the expressive language of literature and film has been extensively established and utilized in EFL contexts, the expressive language of digital games lacks such established definition (see Stannard 2022).

In this vein, approaches aligned with "textual thinking", or that privilege "the synergistic relationship among language, literature, and culture, and between proficiency- and text- oriented curricular goals" (Paesani 2016, 131) within a relational approach (Kern 2015) feature most prominently here. This includes approaches that have long been established for working with other forms of expressive media in TEFL, especially literary and filmic learning. These

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[94] Within this dissertation's focus on narrative games, narrative is seen to be one kind of expressive genre. Even games without an explicit narrative can be treated as expressive media – just like performance, visual art, dance, poetry *can* have narrative, but they also stand on their own feet as expressive media without needing a narrative *per se. In relating this to game media,* Henry Jenkins, for instance, has compared *Tetris*, a game that distinctly lacks storytelling ambitions, as a kind of dance (see Jenkins 2004, n.p.).

[95] This notion of expressive media is derived in part from Janet Murray's distinction between additive vs. expressive media (Murray 2016): A mature medium utilizes the specific affordances of the medium to expressive purpose, whereas a less mature or additive medium would rely on conventions established by older media formats. This work considers game mechanics as a key affordance of digital games as expressive digital media. A game mechanic can be defined as "an action that a player can take that changes the game state" (Isbister 2017, 10).

approaches are seen to be aligned with the priorities of a literacies framework for language education, which also privileges meaning making as a negotiation between educational actors and texts. In focusing on literary learning in TEFL, the following aspects are considered particularly relevant to the following discussion (see also Stannard 2022, 99):

- The learning objectives and instructional practices associated with literary learning are resonant with all forms of expressive media, regardless of such media's varied modalities (see Lütge 2018). This includes narrative digital games;
- In embracing a reader-response orientation to literary learning (see Delanoy 2015; Lütge 2018), engaging with expressive texts involves cultivating, leveraging and extending subjective individual responses to these texts that can then be communicatively negotiated within the interactional context of the classroom (Surkamp & Nünning 2020);
- Individual responses would include an articulation of aesthetic experience, which requires some degree of aesthetic and narrative competence in game media. Such responses can be expanded on through both analytic (e.g. through an exploration of themes and conventionalized expressive devices) and creative tasks (e.g. through performing, adapting or extending texts) (see Lütge 2018; Paran & Robinson 2016);
- Literary learning is additionally relevant to cultural learning, whereas learners may engage in perspective taking and the negotiation of cultural identities and discourses (Freitag-Hild 2019). This last aspect will be engaged with more thoroughly in Chapter 6.

While any kind of expressive media can be treated in the language classroom for a variety of purposes and to meet a range of goals (as relates to the *Bildungsstandards* and *LehrplanPLUS*: e.g. communicative competencies, text and media competencies, intercultural competencies), this chapter will highlight those competencies that are particularly associated with literary learning (Surkamp & Nünning 2020; Paran & Robinson 2016; Lütge 2018) and with other expressive media within a relational approach (Kern 2015; see also Chapter 2.2.2. and 2.3.).

5.1. Ludic aesthetics: Towards a language for digital games as expressive media

When looking at more traditional expressive media in the language classroom, attention is often paid to the unique expressive devices of each medium – treatment of which then enables educators to further extend learner responses in their engagement with a text. In literary learning, we look to literary devices (e.g. Paran & Robinson 2016), and in filmic learning, we look to filmic

devices (e.g. Lütge 2012b). Such a language is lacking, however, for digital games and how they act within their more *expressive* capacities. To harken back to Janet Murray's sentiment that opened this dissertation – "I am hooked on the charm of making the dumb machines sing" (Murray 2017a, 9) – we need a language for embracing games as the "singing machines" they are in addition to their more frequently touted capacities as "learning machines" (e.g. Gee 2003). Having a language for this is useful for learners to have in extending their articulations of their individual responses to gametexts and, critically, it is also needed on the part of educators who have to evaluate and curate gametexts for the language classroom. Without such a language, it is impossible to ascertain the *quality* of games as expressive media. In looking at the uniquely expressive, affective and aesthetic potentialities of games, the following elements will be discussed in detail (see also Stannard 2022[96]):

a) ***The player-character:*** How playable characters are characterized in games, how this characterization is realized through player action, and the implications this has on learner perspective taking in relation to the text and its themes.
b) ***The gameworld and its material encounters:*** A players' experience of exploring a game's environments and all its interactable objects. How a player is able to act on the world and how the world acts back on the character further characterizes the player-character and informs their lived experience of this world. Game objects, environments and interfaces can compliment, extend and challenge the stories and themes embedded in a game.
c) ***Flow and player engagement:*** How games leverage player engagement through game mechanics. What affective conditions contribute to player engagement (i.e. how does a game engage one's sense of fun, challenge, creativity, curiosity, empathy?). How do skillful game designers manipulate flow states in their games in order to further develop a game's textual impact and themes?
d) ***Choices and configurations:*** How the actions of players are authored by the kinds of choices designed into games. How the available choices impact the experiences (aesthetic and affective) and meanings that are evoked in response to a text.

It is no wonder that an aesthetic and analytic language for games as expressive media is lacking in the classroom as even within dedicated fields, such as Game Studies, this aspect is quite

[96] This sub-chapter draws extensively from a previously published work: "Short Digital Games as Expressive Media in the EFL Classroom: Exploring Avatars, Flow and Choice" (Stannard 2022)

contested with much of the discourse being bogged down by core definitional issues ('What is a narrative?' 'What is a game?'; see Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2004). In choosing which discourses to prioritize for the purposes of this methodological frame, I have attended to commonly articulated objectives of *literary* learning and literacy-informed perspectives in EFL education (see also Chapter 2.2.2.): i.e. a focus on affective, aesthetic and critical engagement with texts in addition to the development of linguistic-discursive competence (i.e. literary literacy; see Lütge 2018) and as this is facilitated by inviting both individual responses and a negotiation of subjective meanings (both creative and analytical) within the interactional context of the classroom (see Surkamp & Nünning 2020; Paran & Robinson 2016; Lütge 2018). To this purpose, Game Studies theorist, Katherine Isbister's, focus on the 'emotionality' of digital games is seen to be especially productive.

5.1.1. The player-character

> "As with protagonists in film, the player learns about avatars through how they look and how they react to other characters […] However, the avatar's personal qualities and capacities are also reflected in what it is possible for the player to *do* on multiple psychological levels […] The player moves through the game world taking actions as this person, adopting his or her concerns and struggling towards his or her goals." (Isbister 2017, 11)

Isbister uses the term 'avatar', but I prefer the term player-character as some games don't include an avatar in the sense of a digitally-rendered body that you control (e.g. in games that feature a 1st person versus a 3rd person filmic point of view; see also Chapter 7.2.), but still involves the player in a role that is relevant to the gameworld. Just as with any other narrative media, learners can be asked to consider how the protagonist is characterized. Within a digital game, much of the characterization is discovered via player action: the player-character acts in the gameworld and discovers what they are able to do and which constraints must be adhered to. For example, *Bury me, my love* is a ludonarrative in which the player takes on the role of a Syrian man, Majd, as he communicates with his wife, Nour, via text message as she travels to Europe seeking asylum. As I have written previously (Stannard 2022):

> "The player, in the role as Majd, can choose dialogue options that influence Nour in her decision making as she treks towards Europe – decisions which may result in her success or failure. The game developers explicitly created the game in reaction to criticisms bandied in European media at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis against 'seemingly' destitute refugees entering Europe with expensive smartphones. By casting players in the role of an asylum seeker's husband, the game designers hoped to generate empathy and understanding towards the lifeline that smartphones constitute for asylum seekers forced into undertaking

> treacherous journeys (Arte 2017). In considering expressive decision making by the game designers, the game is somewhat unique in that the player is not cast as the most obvious protagonist, Nour – the character who is undertaking a dangerous journey and engaging in actions that would perhaps more traditionally feature in a mainstream action-adventure game – but rather as Majd, who is more passively following along with Nour's journey via text messages. Having the player take on the role of Majd succeeds in multiple ways: through the text messages, players are confronted with two multifaceted and relatable characters, who alternate between joking and worrying and negotiating their relationship in front of the backdrop of their situation. Having the player take on Majd as their avatar undermines a premise taken for granted in mainstream digital play: that the player is the hero and that the player has control over the game. While the player chooses dialogue options with the intention of steering Nour's actions, she is her own person in the game and often chooses to go against the player's recommendations. Empathy for Nour and her situation is generated not by 'walking in her shoes,' but rather by offering players opportunity to empathize with Majd's worry, through experiencing his lack of control over a dangerous situation confronted by someone he loves. This lack of control is expressed through a number of different game mechanics: first, through mechanics of choice where player choices are limited and it is unclear what impact they will have on the narrative alongside unseen variables that dictate Nour's actions (i.e. her morale, relationship level with Majd, budget and objects in her hidden inventory; Arte 2017); second, through an optional 'real time' mechanic where Nour stops text messaging for longer periods, forcing the player to wait through multiple cliff-hangers for Nour to hopefully return to the conversation." (Stannard 2022, 104)

This is a stark difference to typical hero driven game narratives, where characters get stronger and stronger, gaining access to better equipment, abilities and resources – where time and energy invested equates to more control over the game environment and, therefore, positive outcomes. The effect of what the player-character *can't* do in *Bury me, my love* creates a tension which does not relent throughout the playthrough – the need to take thoughtful action in face of dire consequences, accompanied by a sense of futility in the face of unseen factors and being able to exercise only indirect control. The variability of the narrative (featuring not just branching paths but unseen variables that impact which paths are ultimately accessible; see Chapter 2.3.2.) means there can be a significant experience gap between player playthroughs that can be brought into the classroom. Learners can also try to re-create paths experienced by other players with considerable difficulty. Other interesting examples of characterization through action and narrative progression in digital games includes:

- ***The Stanley Parable*:** As explained by the voiceover of the game's Narrator, you are Stanley, an office worker who has up until now been happy to thoughtlessly input commands into his computer at the prompting of an unseen authority. One day, the prompts stop, and you arise from your desk to find the workplace abandoned. As you explore the office, the Narrator reliably narrates your actions, until you are confronted

with two doorways. The Narrator says: "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left." – and now you are confronted with a choice. Do you follow along with the Narrator's wishes? Or do you exercise agency and see where you wind up? The game unfolds as a battle of wills between the Narrator as character and you as player-character and functions as a commentary on the nature of agency and choice in digital games. What is interesting in this game is not how Stanley is characterized through the player's action – as Stanley is somewhat of a blank slate – but how the Narrator is characterized as his existential well-being is tied up in the player's actions.

- ***Her Story*:** As has been mentioned earlier in this dissertation (Chapters 2.3.2. and 4.3.), you begin the game confronted by a police database and so it is easy to assume that your character – if you have one at all – is a detective. Upon playing the game, it becomes clearer that you are not what you seem – and you become a part of the mystery that is at the core of the game's narrative.
- ***Heaven's Vault*:** In fantasy adventure games, the player-character swings a sword; in shooters, the player-character shoots guns; Super Mario jumps; Pac Man eats – In Heaven's Vault, you play an archaeologist and wield curiosity and knowledge in order to explore new narrative pathways, discover lost worlds and decode ancient languages. Open exploration, dogged interactions with NPCs and the tackling of language puzzles which contribute to your character's growing lexicon of the game's ancient languages are all resonant with the character's role within the gameworld. Since 'negotiation of meaning' is this character's bread and butter, it is a rare example of a digital game featuring both open exploration and sustained, effortful orientation-seeking within the gameworld (as opposed to iterative action; see Chapters 2.3.2. and 3.3.3.).

In exploring such games as expressive, narrative texts, learners can be asked to consider characterization both in terms of what they know from other media – What does your character look like? How do they talk? What kinds of relationships do they have? How do they respond to events? – but they can also consider how characterization in digital games is fundamentally linked to player action – What can you do? What can't you do? To what degree do your choices and projected values contribute to characterization? (For a closer consideration of identity play and its implications for *cultural* learning in the EFL classroom, see also Chapter 6.1.2 and 6.1.3.)

5.1.2. The gameworld as material encounters

Addressing the materiality of gameworlds is not so different from addressing the materiality involved in acting in a play: in a play, you walk out onto a set depicting an environment of some kind, you interact with props and set pieces, you engage in scripted dialogue with other actors. If one is acting in a play as a full, traditionally-conceived production (lights, sets, props, costumes), the script is generally a starting point that is negotiated through the director's vision, and the resulting *mise en scene* is the overall impression of the performance as communicated through props, sets, costumes and the performance-style that is creatively interpreted from the text. In contrast, in walking into a game, the player as actor doesn't know the script yet – and so much of their understanding of the gameworld (where they are; who they are; where this story will lead them) is deduced from the gameworld as a material, explorable, interactable environment. In their awareness of the gameworld, they are as much actor as audience. Ryan has drawn a similar comparison but between games and another performative medium, film:

> "players are not only agents, but also spectators of their own pretended actions. The game experience is therefore halfway between living life and watching a movie. Moreover, game action operates on symbols, within a designed environment, whereas real-life action operates on material objects within a world thrown together for no obvious purpose." (Ryan 2006, 190)

One strong example of how the material aspects of the gameworld contribute to meaning can be seen in the game *Gone Home*. In the game, you do not get to see yourself as a character in the world – i.e. it features a first-person perspective in which the camera is the player-character's view of the world – and you do not get to interact with any other NPCs. Instead, you are confronted with a large house that is filled with secret routes, the sounds of a storm alongside a *Riot Grrl*[97] soundtrack playing in the background, and lots and lots of *things* – books, packages of toilet paper, food, telephones, zines, VHS tapes – all of which can be picked up, rotated and analysed in detail. The narrative is formed by physical engagement in this space, within its sounds, with its objects. Much of the tension of the game is the eeriness of this lifeless house – the set, props, lights, sound are all there, but the actors are missing – leading to the expectation that someone or something could suddenly appear, perhaps while you are busy looking in the other direction (Spoiler: No one ever appears, but unless you know differently, the feeling that it *could* happen follows you throughout the playthrough. This is a tension that is a common feature

[97] *Riot Grrl*: A feminist punk-rock genre from the 90s.

of the so-called 'Walking Simulator' genre of narrative games; see also Chapter 7.2.1.). This space – filled with stuff but without people – draws stark attention to everything and everyone that *isn't* there. And so you begin to cautiously explore. You move into rooms that look lived in, pick up objects, rotate them to see all their edges, and place them back where you like. By interacting with certain objects or moving into certain spaces, a voiceover plays of a person who you eventually learn is your sister – her recorded presence follows you through the playthrough – but where is she? And what drew her to abandon this seemingly affluent, upper-middle class American home of the 90's? – a story that you can locate in time through its soundtrack and the medial artefacts of the time (VHS tapes, audio cassettes and zines). Other walking simulators, such as *What Remains of Edith Finch, That Dragon, Cancer, Everybody's gone to the Rapture* work similarly to *Gone Home*. These games emphasize how 'story' can be *embedded* in the materiality of the world we are surrounded by (see also Chapter 5.3.3 on *embedded narrative*; Jenkins 2004). Other titles that are worthy of mention include:

- *Unpacking*. This is not so much a game as a story-laden sandbox. The entire game features you unpacking boxes after moves during different phases of the player-character's life (childhood, teenaged years, college, moving in with a partner, breaking up with partner and moving back to the family home). You learn about this person through contact with the things they have found (and continue to find) meaningful over the trajectory of their life as a series of shifting environments.
- Commercial, AAA-Games, particularly adventure games and RPGs, are also significant – not just in terms of their elaborate environments (which can feature in all game genres) but in how the objects that you collect and work with in the gameworld help contribute to the lore of the game. For example, in *Fallout 4* in which you collect endless 50s-era objects that litter the post-nuclear hellscape of the game (bottlecaps are iconically used as currency in the Fallout universe of games). In *Horizon Zero Dawn,* another post-apocalyptic title with a narrative steeped in ecocriticism (it features a world that has been reclaimed by nature, and where the technological remnants of the old world have a life of their own), relics of the old world are less frequently found but all the more significant in the brief snapshots they grant you of the old world – often contributing to the mystery of how this version of the world came to be (something which is more immediately explicit in the *Fallout* titles).
- High Fantasy titles, such as *Skyrim*, *Witcher III*, and *Divinity: Original Sin II* feature extensive looting of spaces, crafting and collecting of books.

Finally, a ludonarrative genre that I will propose again in Chapter 7 is the *interface fiction*: Within these games, the explorable environment or 'stage' is that of an interface (of a laptop, a phone) and the interactable objects or 'props' are the assemblage of apps and texts that are linked through this interface (e.g. text messages, photos, social media profiles). Significantly, these games often feature a player-character in first-person perspective – sometimes where it is not even clear until later in the game if you are playing a distinct character (e.g. *Her Story; Bury me, my love)* or if you are simply a neutral presence (e.g. *A normal lost phone*). Who you are is defined over time through your engagements within this highly digital textual landscape. The simulated devices with their interfaces and textual networks are digital embodiments of identity. Additional game titles to consider here include *A Normal Lost Phone, Bury me my love* and *Orwell,* and will be considered again in Chapter 7.2.2. of this dissertation.

5.1.3. Flow and mechanics of engagement

The ease with which players achieve a flow state when playing a game is often formulated as a core goal of game design. The term *flow* was coined by psychological researcher Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi as a state of being 'in the zone', where one is intensively engaged with a challenging (but not excessively challenging) task which triggers an intense, time-stopping state of concentration, sense of control, and satisfaction in connection to an activity (Csikzentmihalyi 1997). In digital games, achieving a state of flow means that a player is completely engaged with the activities specific to the game world (e.g. in a platformer, running and jumping; in a point-and-click adventure, exploring a multimodal environment and solving puzzles). Game designers are tasked with keeping players in a "sweet spot where they have the right amount of ability to meet the challenges at hand", since "Too little ability can result in anxiety and frustration; too little challenge can result in boredom or apathy." (Isbister 2017, 5). Flow has been a source of frustration for educators and researchers looking to utilize digital games for the purposes of education: on the one hand, too much flow can mean learners become distracted by game activity that is opposed to those aspects of a game that educators find most 'learnful'. For example, in a study conducted by de Castell et al. 2017 who tried to teach 6th grade learners narrative competence through the game, The *Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, they frequently found players too engaged in iterative activity – like picking up and throwing pigs – to attend to the game's story (de Castell et al. 2017). On the other hand, games might be recruited with the expectation that learners will be motivated in achieving a flow state, which may not happen when the game is not one that they particularly like. As I've written elsewhere:

> "As applies to digital games, learners' individual responses to games as texts can be quite diverse due to equally diverse experiences of play. This diversity of experience may, for instance, come about in narrative games which feature multiple narrative pathways – in which case, learners quite literally engage with different versions of the same text (Lütge et al. 2019). It may also relate to the diverse kinds of play learners are more drawn to within a particular game world – i.e. one learner may be heavily invested in the story, whereas another may be more invested in mechanics that involve collecting, crafting, optimizing, exploring, socializing and so on. Consequently, when individual games exclude mechanics that are most appealing to different learners, responses to a game can be quite negative ('the game is boring / too hard / too easy'; see Reinhardt 2019). Analytic and creative activities common to a literary approach can be useful here, as they offer learners an opportunity to extend, take ownership of and creatively engage with their initial aesthetic responses to a text." (Stannard 2022, 99)

Although it is largely taken for granted in game discourse that bringing players to a flow state is a feature of good game design, game designers can foil this expectation in leveraging flow-impacting mechanics as expressive devices. To provide some examples:

The game, *The Voter Suppression Trail,* demonstrates how designing a game to be too difficult and frustrating for the player can serve as commentary on a social issue. The game is an editorial game created for the *New York Times* during the 2016 American elections where the player is prompted to vote as either "a white programmer from California", "A Latina nurse from Texas", or "A black salesman from Wisconsin" (see *Voter Suppression Trail*). If the player chooses to play as a minority, their attempts to vote are flouted at every turn in the form of long lines, steep I.D. requirements, and voter intimidation which is depicted as an arcade-style mini-game where the player has to dodge insults spat out by angry white men. The mini-game is difficult and almost inevitably leads to a 'Game Over' in which the player's vote 'dies'. Any frustration the player experiences at being trapped in an unwinnable game is indeed the message: 'yes, we *should* be frustrated about the issue of voter suppression in American elections'.

Hair Nah, is an arcade game by Momo Pixel created as "a response to the perverse action of touching a Black woman's hair without permission. The micro-aggression of assumed authority and ownership of black bodies." (Pixel n.d., n.p.). In the game, the player-character sits in an airplane and is made to whack at the hands of white women that fly out from the corners of the screen to touch the Black avatar's hair. The game is very difficult and, thus, effective at conjuring the frustration inherent to Momo Pixel's message.

In *Heavy Rain*, a larger budget console game, game design auteur David Cage creates agonizingly suspenseful moments by slowing down player action. Game scholar and critic, Ian Bogost, highlights one moment of the game in particular in illustrating how games generate suspense in a way unique from the techniques used in film. In the game, the player-character, a father named Ethan, loses his child in the mall and, rather than a frenetic sequence with quick

shots and close up views of crowds – everything slows down – the NPCs freeze in space and the player-character goes around in agonizingly slow circles while being able to perform only one action – calling out their child's name with the push of one button over and over:

> "In a film, that frenzy would be best carried out through quick cuts: Ethan looking in different directions; a fast pan of the crowd, left and right; Ethan's movement through the mall concourse; a handheld first-person view down the escalators; more visually confused panning; a glimpse of a balloon; and then a cut to a different boy grasping it. […] But as anyone knows who has lost a child in a public place, even if only briefly, the central sensations of that experience are not rapidness but slowness. The slow panic of confusion and disorientation, the feeling of extended uncertainty as moments give way to minutes. The sound of each footfall and the neurosis of each head turn. […] If the edit is cinema's core feature, then *Heavy Rain* does the opposite: it lengthens rather than abridges." (Bogost 2015, 99)

Here, the player is still likely in a state of flow – an extended moment of suspense – that becomes all the more agonizing for a *lack* of frenetic action that is too frequently the only tool leveraged by designers in fostering player engagement. This 'lengthening' that Bogost mentions also illustrates how iterative action in games – a feature I have up until now introduced as opposed to narrative progression in games – can be used expressively to force players to linger inside an impactful narrative moment. A reminder that *narrative efficiency* is not the only potential goal of story-driven gaming.

Mortician's Tale uses the opposite technique of making a game deliberately dull. The player runs a funeral home which involves reading emails, engaging in mundane dialogue with family members of the deceased and preparing corpses for funeral viewings using non-challenging sensorimotoric activities (e.g. wiping the body down with a sponge, filling it with embalming fluid). Gabby DaRienzo, the designer of the game, explains that "death in games has often been utilized as a mechanic in order to punish and/or challenge the player – encouraging them to do better, or giving them motive to continue playing. These methods are tried and true, but often it feels like game developers don't always consider if these traditional death mechanics best fit their games." (DaRienzo 2016, n.p.). In providing a mellower set of mechanics for the exploration of death, DaRienzo provides players the space "to explore their thoughts and feelings about death" and to "really think about what they want for themselves when they die" (ibid). Game studies theorist Astrid Ensslin's exploration of 'literary gaming' elucidates a cognitive gaming style more akin to 'reading' than 'playing', often with the explicit purpose of challenging established game tropes and their attendant ideologies (Ensslin 2014). In refusing to let players get lost in a more frenetic flow state, such contemplative games force the player to attend to particular themes or affective experiences (see also Stannard 2022, 107).

Explicit attention to how games engage players – in terms of flow, but also as relates to specific flavours of engagement, such as fun, curiosity, challenge, empathy, creativity – can support learners in extending their initial impressions of a game as 'fun', 'boring', 'too difficult', 'too easy'. This is important in that learners may have unexamined dispositions and beliefs towards gameplay (Reinhardt 2019, 151) and it can not be taken for granted that all players will find all games – even games that are popularly considered to be well-designed – universally motivating or 'fun' (see also Stannard 2022, 107). Indeed, Reinhardt argues that "A learnful disposition can shift preferences, too; for example, a player who dislikes interactive fiction in extramural contexts might enjoy it for L2 learning because they recognize its mechanics may support affordances for language learning" (Reinhardt 2019, 151). In a similar vein, treating flow-impacting mechanics as expressive devices encourages learners to read more deeply into the aesthetic responses games engender, even when this does not involve the types of gameplay a learner would choose to 'lose themselves in' on their own time.

5.1.4. Choices and configurations

Player choice and action is perhaps the most defining feature of digital games when compared to other expressive media. Films, books, traditional stage plays, comics, podcasts all position the audience as external to the text. The exception here would be instances where such media 'break the fourth wall' – but even then, the audience's role in such instances is generally a passive one.[98] In contrast, digital games invite their players to take control of the media – within the role of a particular character (or perhaps as an anonymous puppet master when no particular character is attributed to them). Choices in games may require more or less thoughtful engagement on the part of the player – e.g. choosing when to run and jump in a platformer versus configuring a character and choosing narrative paths within an RPG. As was introduced in Chapter 4, where choices in games involve goal-oriented negotiations of meaning (and the bridging of ludonarrative gaps; see Chapter 4.2.3.) the more the playscape of the game could be regarded as 'task-like'. In considering the *expressive* quality of choices in games, it has been argued that when

[98] There are exceptions to this even in traditional media. For instance, within Espen Aarseth's notion of ergogic literature. This notion includes games, but includes any expressive media where non-trivial effort is needed to traverse a text. One pre-digital example that Aarseth refers to is Ayn Rand's, *Night of January 16th* (1936), a play concerning a trial in which the audience acting as a jury can pick between two endings depending on whichever verdict they reach (see Aarseth 1997, 10).

players are confronted with meaningful, impactful choices in games, the greater chance players will be affectively engaged by the text. As Isbister argues:

> "Actions with consequences – interesting choices – unlock a new set of emotional possibilities for game designers. Ultimately, these possibilities exist because our feelings in everyday life, as well as games, are integrally tied to our goals, our decisions, and their consequences." (Isbister 2017, 2).

Addressing expressive aspects of a game alongside a task-orientation can add dimension to gameplay in the classroom. To give an example, in the browser game, *Fake it to make it,* players are asked to critically reflect on the individual circumstances that lead people to disseminate inflammatory 'fake news' online. In the game, players manage their own news blog with the intention to make money to meet a personal financial goal. Players quickly learn that the quickest way to meet their goals involves publishing sensationalist or 'fake' news. Players are caught in a conflict between acting ethically (publishing 'good' news but then not meeting their financial goals) or succumbing to 'flow' and mastering a game system at all costs in order to win (i.e. getting good enough at maneuvering the game mechanics to make the most money). In the latter scenario, the player is fictionally complicit in an exploitative system. Isbister characterises the feelings of guilt and complicity experienced by players as a specialty of digital games in comparison to other mediums. As I have written previously:

> "In the EFL classroom, if one were to focus on just the task environment of the game, it would be enough for learners to 'get good' at playing the game – or performing the task – without necessarily considering this aspect of complicity. A textual approach demands additional wraparound activities to cultivate further reflection on the experiences of play (How do you feel taking on the perspective of someone who makes fake news?) and how these experiences link to relevant themes (What do you think the game therefore says about the proliferation of fake news? Does it say this effectively?)." (Stannard 2022, 109)

Other games that offer this tension of having no perfect choices include, for example, *Papers, Please*, in which you work as an immigration officer in a fictional cold war era nation and have to decide whether to help desperate people through the checkpoint at personal expense, which then impacts the wellbeing and survivability of your own family (see also Chapter 2.3.2.); or *Life is Strange*, where you have to decide who to save and who to let die; or *This War of Mine,* where you play a civilian in war time trying to survive and which involves an onslaught of critical moments where you have to choose between self-preservation and supporting your neighbours.

In addressing choice in games as an expressive device, we can also attend to how games allow for a narrative discourse that is quite unlike what can be found in other media. As stated in

Chapter 3.3.2., having to puzzle through and contribute ones' own values in making decisions in games involves interesting arrangements of competencies (incl. communicative, discursive, textual) in relation to working with expressive media. For example, in A *Normal Lost Phone*, players must shift from attending to a global understanding of the story, but also detailed engagement with the various textual bits and pieces that give clues as to how to open up more of the narrative. The task-like nature of especially entangled ludonarratives opens up unique opportunities for textual engagement within the interactional context of the classroom where, for instance, game puzzles can be reasoned through collectively or differences in what version of the narrative was experienced can be shared. That being said, in addressing the expressive impacts of narrative games one must move beyond a fascination with the functional structures of ludic narrative discourse and also attend to the ways in which choices are or are not *meaningful* within the text as a whole: i.e. the degree to which these choices align with the themes and messages that can be derived from the text and the degree to which they do or do not contribute to the overall artistry of the text. In other words, two narrative games that offer very similar choice-based narrative mechanics can vary considerably in their overall quality and/or complexity as expressive texts. At times, the games with the most coherent, critical messaging are those that offer *more* constraints on player action and choice rather than offering the greatest range of possible actions. To give an example, *Coming Out Simulator* is an autobiographical game by designer Nicky Case in which he shares his experience of coming out to his parents as a teenager. The player is tasked with arriving at a better conclusion to this conversation with his parents than the one he actually experienced, which resulted in him running away from home. The player navigates dialogues to reach the best possible conclusion, but the game eventually reveals that regardless of what the player chooses, the game will always end the same way – with a falling out in the family and the main character running away from home. This illusion of choice serves as commentary on the nature of this designer's lived experience: an event that he plays over and over again in his head, where he tries to imagine a better way through this conversation that keeps his relationships intact, while also trying to accept that he had only limited control over how the situation ultimately unfolded. That several different players play through the game – performing the event over and over again – serves as an apt metaphor for the rumination that characterizes this personal struggle. To return to the example of *Bury me, my love*, the tension of the game relies on the choices that that player-character, Majd, is *unable* to make on behalf of the actual protagonist, Nour – a further illustration that the choices a player is unable to make can be just as meaningful (and sometimes more so) than the choices they *can* make. In *Bury me, my love*, the variables that impact Nour's journey (her money, her morale, the relationship quality

between her and Majd) are invisible to the player, making it even harder to know what the impact of Majd's dialogue with Nour will be. In comparison, games that offer players *carte blanche* to act in the world however they choose with little in the way of consequences (e.g. *Fable, Hogwarts Legacy, Grand Theft Auto*) feature a kind of ethical ambiguity – which *can* be artful in its own way (e.g. as an anti-establishment social critique), but can also be implemented without such consideration and more to offer a generally engaging and flexible experience for different kinds of players (which then sells more games). In adopting a critical perspective of narrative digital games, one can attend to how the choices that players can make and the consequences for these choices are both authored and ideologically-situated. This involves recognition that most choices or actions that a player can take are, in fact, authored into the gameworld and are not neutral – they represent real and unavoidable ideological biases on the part of game writers and designers. One must then consider, in taking on a game role, 'to what degree am I enacting the ideological script of someone else?' (see also Chapter 6.1.3.).

Having illustrated the aesthetic nuance available to games through elements such as the player-character, the gameworld as an interactable space, mechanics of flow and engagement, and of choice, I will now attend to particular instructional designs for leveraging games as expressive texts in the classroom.

5.2. Designs for expressive play in the TEFL classroom

Having addressed a ludic aesthetics, this next chapter will address different designs for engaging with expressive play in the language classroom. First, a consideration of how game media can be segmented and excerpted when it is infeasible to work with games as whole texts in the language classroom. Second, relevant questions will be introduced that can be supportive in eliciting individual aesthetic-affective responses to games as expressive texts. And third, considerations relating to ludic narrative competence will be presented, which is concerned with how learners can become better acquainted with the narrative affordances of games that are specific to digital game media.

5.2.1. Navigating the pragmatic constraints of gametexts in the classroom: Working with game excerpts and segmenting play

Literature, film, comics all have both long and short forms: novels vs. short stories; feature-length films vs. short films and TV episodes; graphic novels vs. comic strips. Different kinds of games lack this same indication of length. With physical books one can see how long a book is

by the thickness of the spine; with films, the runtime is either printed on the back of the box or visible on the platform that the film is being streamed from. With digital games, however, it is possible to load a game and have absolutely no idea how long the game will take to play. Not only are runtimes rarely disclosed on game packaging or download platforms, run times can also be extremely variable based on how much of a game's content is optional or possesses features that increases a game's re-playability (e.g. highly iterative sandbox, simulation or sports games, as well as games with branching narrative paths and high degree of configurational variability which makes each playthrough somewhat unique). This has given rise to platforms such as www.howlongtobeat.com which allows players to disclose how long it took them to play through a game and distinguishes between playtimes for finishing the main story, the main story + extras, or for completionists, who are likely to unlock all possible content of a game before putting a game down (see Table 15 below).

Table 15: Game times from "how long to beat" of games frequently mentioned in this dissertation (Date accessed 11.12.2021 and 29.12.2023)

Game Title	Main Story	Main Story + Extra	Completionist
Coming Out Simulator	21 Mins	-	-
Florence	40 Mins	50 Mins	52 Mins
Mortician's Tale	56 Mins	1 Hour	1 Hour
Depression Quest	1 Hours	1.5 Hours	1.5 Hours
Blackbar	1.5 Hours	-	1.5 Hours
Venba	1.5 Hours	1.5 Hours	2 Hours
A Normal Lost Phone	1.5 Hours	2 Hours	2 Hours
The Stanley Parable	1.5 Hours	2.5 Hours	7.5 Hours
Bury me, my love	2 Hours	4.5 Hours	9 Hours
Gone Home	2 Hours	2.5 Hours	3 Hours
Her Story	2.5 Hours	3 Hours	4 Hours
Scribblenauts Remix	2.5 Hours	2.5 Hours	4 Hours
Device 6	2.5 Hours	-	-
80 Days	3 Hours	7.5 Hours	31 Hours
Orwell	4.5 Hours	6 Hours	9.5 Hours
There is no game	5 Hours	5.5 Hours	6 Hours
Papers, Please	5 Hours	8.5 Hours	16 Hours
NORCO	6 Hours	7.5 Hours	8 Hours
Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy	6.5 Hours	9 Hours	30.5 Hours
Return of the Obra Dinn	8 Hours	9.5 Hours	10.5 Hours
Heavy Rain	10 Hours	12 Hours	22 Hours
Broken Age	10.5 Hours	11.5 Hours	13.5 Hours
Life is Strange	14 Hours (Episode 1: 2 Hours)	16.5 Hours (Episode 1: 3 Hours)	18.5 Hours (Episode 1: 3 Hours)
Heaven's Vault	15.5 Hours	19.5 Hours	32.5 Hours
Horizon Zero Dawn	22.5 Hours	44 Hours	60 Hours
Legend of Zelda: TOTK	59 Hours	115 Hours	235 Hours

The opaqueness of game length also means that it can be difficult to ascertain while playing a game how far one has progressed through it without referring to external game guides. And in the case of most games, one simply cannot flip to a page to re-play a particular section, or fast forward to a particular scene. One plays from beginning to end, and – outside of the use of save points (a mechanic which is implemented quite variably between game titles) – it can be near to impossible to move back to a previous game moment without a significant time investment (i.e. starting over). Understandably, this presents a significant pragmatic hurdle for the language classroom.

One option is to opt for *short* game media in the classroom. These are often indie titles, many of which are listed in Table 15 above. As argued in Chapter 3.3.2. – such titles often offer rich and unique experiences for the classroom (the 'arthouse films' of game media), but are also perhaps less familiar to learners and require a deeper grasp of and willingness to engage with ludic aesthetics. Where engagement with longer game titles is still desired, many practices can be derived from how other long form media is approached for the language classroom. For instance, in addressing *novels* as long form media, Engelbert Thaler has recommended multiple approaches for reading through parts of a novel, ranging from a "straight through approach" in which "The whole novel is read at home by students before classroom discussion starts" to a "sandwich approach" in which some chapters are read and other chapters are skipped (Thaler 2016, 105; see Table 16 below):

Table 16: Approaches to reading a novel for the classroom (Thaler 2016, 105)

Reading a novel	
Approach	*Description*
Straight Through Approach	The whole novel is read at home by the students before classroom discussion starts.
Segment Approach	In each lesson one segment (or chapter) is discussed in class. This may be prepared at home or/and read at school.
Sandwich Approach	Some chapters of the novel are read, others are skipped.
Appetizer Approach	Only one excerpt from the whole book is read and discussed.
Topic Approach	Several books from the same literary genre, period, author or on a single issue are read in excerpts.
Patchwork Approach	Several books from various authors, genres and periods are read (in excerpts) and discussed.

With a longer game, were one to take a 'straight through approach', this would qualify as 'extended play' (i.e. in the vein of 'extended reading') as a form of *extensive* textual engagement,

which may involve significant gameplay being done at home versus in the classroom. 'Play logs' (in the vein of 'Reading logs') could be useful here. In which case, it could be useful for learners to become familiar with how to take screenshots, screen recordings or link to game media online so that they can collect significant moments for their logs that can then be brought into the classroom for further activity. As introduced in Chapter 4.3., play logs can be designed in such a way that learners 'stay in character' while contributing to their logs – i.e. extending game mechanics into the classroom – such as by treating the log as an extension of the in-game journal, where learners record their play in the form of a 'diary' or 'scrapbook' (including digital alternatives, like creating an Instagram 'story'). To make use of screenshots, screen recordings and other online media, play logs might be compiled in a digital format (e.g. using a relatively simple authoring app, like *Book Creator)* which allows such media to be embedded.

Where *extensive play* is neither desired nor feasible – either in the classroom or as extended play at home – *intensive play* might be warranted where learners play a small portion of the game for a set period of time, collecting as many impressions as they can within this timeframe. Learners can play just the beginning of the game or – with the aid of save points or the use of episodic games, such as *Life is Strange* – segments from later in the game. It is important to note that such gameplay can occur as a whole class, in groups, individually, as well as in the classroom, through a school's media lab, or at home. The next subchapter will address how *intensive play* in particular may be desired for facilitating evocative responses to games as expressive texts that can be taken up in further classroom activity.

However, with some game titles it simply isn't possible to play different sections of a game without playing through from beginning to end. An alternative in this case is to make use of multimodal game excerpts in e.g. the form of video, images or text:

a) Game Video: This would involve using screen recordings of a game. The teacher or learners can make screen recordings themselves or, alternatively, can make use of recordings on video platforms such as YouTube and Twitch. Note that recordings on other platforms may feature differing degrees of editing: For example, gameplay movies are often playthroughs that include all the narrative cut-scenes from a game with the rest of the gameplay removed from the recording and resemble full-feature films; *Let's Plays* may feature commentary on top of the gameplay recordings. Activities for working with gameplay video might resemble the use of film in the language classroom (see Lütge 2012b; Thaler (ed.) 2017). Other activities are also possible that work with video genres specific to digital game cultures (see also Chapter 6.2.), such as

having learners create their own *Let's Plays* where they add their own audio commentary onto recordings of gameplay.

b) Game Images: Screenshots of gameplay (taken from learner playthroughs, teacher playthroughs, or sourced from online[99]) can also be recruited and can be read like images in the language classroom (see Donaghy & Xerri 2017). There is a large range of activity that can be leveraged with game images: By putting sequences of screenshots together, one can create a comic that can be used in the classroom; Learners may be asked to collect a series of images from the game that depict significant moments of their playthroughs to work with in class; Images can also be useful *during* classroom play to indicate checkpoints for a particular play session and which keep learners on the same page. Within this last usage, screenshots of significant game moments or locations can be shown on a screen or board while learners play. Learners have to find these game moments or locations and, when they do, stop playing to check-in. Learners can consolidate information about the narrative so far, can help other players reach the same spot if it is important for the group to progress somewhat equally through the narrative, reflect on how they are responding to the game so far, or consider what is going to happen next. It can be a significant support for teachers and learners to become familiar with the quick screenshotting and screen recording functions on the various devices that might be used for play.

c) Game Text: This involves taking transcribed bits of textual material from games. Popular games are often transcribed by fans which can then be found online. Transcriptions of dialogue can be used like the scene of a play, for example. With certain games, the bits of transcribed text may be artful in and of themselves. For example, in the absurdist game, *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, one plays a muscled man sitting in a cauldron who is trying to climb a mountain by swinging around a metal hammer. The game is extremely difficult and involves a lot of failure and losing ones progress; this is accompanied by game voiceovers that make it clear that the game is acting as a commentary on the nature of failure and iterative action in gaming. Much of the commentary consists of quotations regarding failure and perseverance from both literature and from famous figures. As the game setting becomes increasingly surreal, the following voiceover plays:

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[99] Games often release press kits for use by the media outlets that review games. These often feature high quality screen shots that can also be used for classroom purposes.

"Maybe this is what digital culture is.
A monstrous mountain of trash,
the ash heap of creativity's fountain.
A landfill with everything we ever thought of in it
Grand, infinite and unsorted.
There's 3D models of breakfast
gen xers' fanfic novels
scanned magazines
green-screen Shia leBeouf,
banned snuff scenes on liveleak
facebook's got lifelike bots
with unbranded adverts,
and candid shots of kanye
and taylor swift mashups
car crash epic fail gifs
Russian dashcam vids
discussions of McRibs
discarded, forgotten, unrecycled
muddled, rotten, untitled
Everything's fresh for about six seconds
until some newer thing beckons
and we hit refresh.
And there's years of persevering
Disappearing into the pile
Out of style
Out of sight"

(From *Getting over it with Bennett Foddy;* see also Mahidul Haque 2017, 4:20-5:11)

This excerpt can be treated as a kind of poem in and of itself and be addressed as an expressive text in the language classroom. The silent visuals of this game section could also be introduced before or after introducing the text/audio for learners to use as their own writing prompt. In games that feature textual play, i.e. that incorporate different textual forms and/or interfaces as a part of navigating the game narrative (such as text messages, letters, books, maps etc.; see also Chapter 7.2.2.) it can be worthwhile to excerpt these bits and pieces and embed them into classroom activity. The game, *The Return of the Obra Dinn,* for instance, involves investigating a series of catastrophic events on a boat and then recording insights in a game journal. Using an analogue version of this journal (in part or in whole) would be especially warranted considering the colonial setting of the game world (again, extending the gameworld into the classroom; see Chapter 4.3.).

What is clear with the above examples is that digital games as hybrid, semiotically diverse and often intensely multimodal media offer a lot in terms of what can be excerpted for further classroom activity – with some of this activity derived from techniques already established in working with related expressive media (such as written texts, comics, film and so on) and other

activity specific to the wider discursive world of digital game cultures (e.g. making *Let's Plays* or game mods, see Chapter 6.2.). The challenge with digital games is that their variability means one needs to approach the specific semiotic affordances of each game individually and with significant clarity of purpose – which emphasizes that a text-specific approach to games (rather than a monolithic notion of games and game cultures, see Chapter 1.1.2.) is desirable.

It should be noted that working extensively with game excerpts can be underwhelming where the quality of classroom tasks does not compare to the engagement that might be derived through play. When working with game excerpts to fill in narrative blanks, learners could feel that the game is being 'spoiled' for them – that they have lost the opportunity to experience the game 'from the driver's seat', as was intended. When game excerpts are utilized not to explore the whole narrative, but rather to explore certain themes, this may be beneficial when such excerpts are used in connection with other kinds of texts (see Thaler's 'topic' or 'patchwork' approach in Table 16 above). Regardless, in engaging with games as *expressive* texts, there may be a point of diminishing returns in working with game excerpts almost exclusively as these will never be as 'evocative' as engaging with games through play – an aspect that will be addressed in more detail in the following section.

5.2.2. Engaging individual aesthetic and affective responses through play

In Chapter 4. it was suggested that games might be played in the classroom when their task environments resemble the kinds of communicative acts and/or that feature negotiations of meaning that align with the communicative and literacies-informed objectives of formal language education. In addressing games as *expressive* texts, an additional purpose of play opens up – engaging with learners' responses to games as affective-aesthetic media. In other words, regarding games as artful cultural artefacts that are enriching to experience and where expanding on this experience can lead to further meaningful activity in the classroom. In considering what this meaningful activity might look like, I refer now to Cope and Kalantzis's *Knowledge Processes* as these have been developed within their expansions to Multiliteracies Pedagogy (Kalantzis et al. 2016, n.p.; see also Stannard 2022, 100):

Table 17: Multiliteracy Pedagogy's 'Knowledge Processes' as paired with an exploration of game media as expressive media

Knowledge Processes (Kalantzis et al. 2016)	**Learner activities associated with these processes as relates to engaging with digital games as expressive texts**
Experiencing the known and the new	Playing new games; relating new play experiences to experiences with previous gameplay and related media; Considering the story alongside comparable stories experienced through other media.
Conceptualizing by naming and with theory	Describing play experiences and articulating individual responses to play experiences; identifying and naming relevant game goals and game mechanics.
Analysing functionally and critically	Exploring the impact and consequences of game mechanics on player experience; forming interpretations of the game as relates to aesthetic impacts, attendant themes and cultural discourses; addressing ideological orientations underlying the story and play mechanics. Demonstrating ludic narrative competence (see Chapter 5.3.3.).
Applying appropriately and creatively	This can involve learners participating in the larger cultural discourses that surround game media, such as fan fiction, game criticism, and curation (see Chapter 6.2.), which can also include creative and product-oriented approaches in which learners are tasked with acting as game designers (see Chapter 6.2.3.). Learners may design their own playable games, but could also pitch conceptual designs: for instance, how they would extend or adapt games (e.g. How would changing this mechanic effect the gameplay and meaning of the game?) or develop their own game concepts.

Similarly, Delanoy – drawing from 'reader-response theory' as developed by Rosenblatt (1994) – speaks of "evocation" and "interpretation" as a progression of textual engagement in response to literary texts which roughly aligns with the progression implied in Cope & Kalantzis's Knowledge Processes:

> "While evocation stands for the process of building up a personal relationship with a text while reading it, interpretation comes at the post-reading stage, serving the articulation and refinement of reader responses. In other words, in this model, evocation precedes interpretation, i.e. developing a personal response is a pre-condition for any interpretation work. Moreover, each learning cycle should lead to a new one, where the insights gained can be applied and further developed." (Delanoy 2015, 29).

The evocative responses as valued by Delanoy can not occur through a use of game excerpts alone. In other words, from this view it is not enough to simply look at game media that is derived from gameplay (e.g. working with game screenshots or screen recordings), rather a full evocative response is reliant on the learner having an opportunity to occupy a role within the gameworld. In terms of sequencing engagement with expressive gameplay in the classroom, certain designs could be considered:

a) Fostering evocative opportunities

What considerations for structuring engagement with games as expressive media must be kept in mind in better securing evocative responses in relation to game media? Firstly, there is likely such a thing as 'too much' pedagogic framing that might occur in a pre-phase before learners are given the opportunity to play. This is particularly true where pre-activities would attend more to the learner-player role of learners 'as language learners playing a game' versus 'as people taking on a game role' (Chapter 4.3.). One option is to give learners very little support at all before their first play session and have a certain degree of tolerance for the initial fumbling around with a game's controls as simply part of the process of learners orienteering themselves and negotiating meaning with the new gameworld. This is likely appropriate for learners who already play games and who are familiar with (and who are more likely to enjoy) the re-semiotization process that is involved in sinking into a new gameful semiotic domain. Learners who are unfamiliar with game media (or the relevant genres of game media) may feel that they have been thrown into the deep end and struggle to acclimatize to the domain of the game. An alternative here is to focus on pre-activities that 'recruit' the game roles of the player-character into the classroom – bringing some of the re-semiotization process that is typical of orienting oneself to the semiotic domain of a new game into the task environment of the classroom (see also Chapter 4.3.). This is perhaps not so far removed from the activities one might do in preparing learners to read a play – offering them an opportunity to grasp the setting and their role within it before engaging in more intensive scene work. Even where extensive play is infeasible with a particular game (because it is too long; the game mechanics are too divorced from effective language practice) introducing a session of 'discovery play' with such role-sensitive framing can be helpful in allowing the player to engage with the game through the eyes of a gamer, rather than purely as a learner – thus securing learners' evocative responses. After sharing impressions in the classroom, further sessions of intensive play can give learners an opportunity to refine their impressions. It should be emphasized again that learners who are unfamiliar with certain styles of play (e.g. action, platforming) may need time to gain confidence with the basic mechanics before they can attend to meaning (e.g. de Castell et al. 2017).

b) Encouraging interpretive responses

In moving from evocation to interpretation, what questions can be asked of learners (both through conversational prompting or through action-oriented/productive/creative tasks) to have them interrogate their evoked responses to a game? In returning to the ludic aesthetic elements introduced earlier – of player-character, player engagement and flow, the gameworld as

material encounters, and choices and configurations – I offer the following guiding questions (see also Stannard 2022):

Table 18: Guiding questions and creative interventions for extending aesthetic responses to gametexts

The player-character	**Player engagement and flow**
- What kind of character are you? How do you know? - To what degree do you, as the player, get to determine how your character looks or behaves in this game? - What kinds of actions can your character take in this game? Are you satisfied with the range of action available to you as a player within this avatar? Is this range of action appropriate to the themes of the text? Does this range of action allow you to act within your own values or the values you imagine for your character? - If you could give this avatar additional actions or abilities, what would they be? How would these new actions contribute to the meaning of the text? - Why do you think the game designers cast you as this character in particular? How would your experience of the game change if you were to be cast as a different character? - How might the game mechanics (the actions you are allowed to take) change if you were to re-design the game from the perspective of another character?	- Did you experience flow while playing this game? What mechanics especially facilitated or hindered this experience of flow? - Do you think the game designers intended for you to experience flow in this way? Is this experience of flow relevant to the themes explored by the game? - Whether outside of flow or as a part of flow – In what other ways does the game engage you? In particular – to what degree does it appeal to your sense of fun, curiosity, challenge, empathy, etc? - If you were on the team that designed this game, would you have made different design choices in fostering a different quality of flow/engagement? What mechanics or other aspects of the game would you change to achieve this? - Consider a pet peeve or issue (personal or social; mundane or meaningful) that makes you emotional (e.g. anger at people nagging you; annoyance with people not responding to texts right away; frustration with college applications; fear of global warming; confusion about what to wear in the morning; ickiness at people chewing with their mouths open). Imagine you were to create a game that fostered that emotion in other players. What would that game look like? What would the mechanics be?
The gameworld as material encounters	**Choices and configurations**
- Before playing too deeply into the game narrative, imagine you are a material anthropologist or archeologist: Consider the setting and other objects that you can interact with. What do they tell you about the characters and cultures designed for this gameworld? - How does the gameworld and its objects contribute to what you know about the story or what you can predict about how the narrative will unfold? - What do you learn through these material engagements that you haven't learned through any other game element?	- To what degree were your choices meaningful to the progression of the story? What does this say about the designer(s)' worldview or orientation towards the text's themes? - Choose a moment in the story: Which choices were you offered? What were the various outcomes? What do these outcomes communicate about the designer(s)' worldview or orientation towards the text's themes? Is this similar to your own worldview or opinion on these issues? - If you were to write for this game, what choices would you offer the player? What would the consequences of these choices be? - Take a screenshot of a moment in a digital game where you have to make a significant choice. Use this as a basis for creating your own choice-based narrative game using an accessible interactive fiction editor such as Inklewriter or Twine). Author your own choices, consequences and further sequences of events as an alternative to that which features in the game.

5.2.3. Ludic narrative competence: Exploring narrative architectures through play

The distinction between entangled and complementary ludonarrativity is especially helpful for *educators* in understanding how player action relates to narrative progression – i.e. 'what exactly will my learners be *doing* inside of this kind of game?' 'To what degree do their actions count as narrative action vs. iterative action?' 'And if the action is iterative, does this action qualify as language practice?' For the purposes of learners' narrative competence, another (if not entirely incompatible) view of narrativity in games can be productive. Henry Jenkins argues that rather than seeing games as stories, they can be viewed as *spaces* of narrative possibility. In arguing for a narrative architecture of digital games, he delineates four perspectives on narrative within the gameworld as a navigable space: a) games as evocative spaces, b) narrative as enacted stories, c) embedded narratives and d) emergent narratives. The table below includes a description of each and a discussion as to how this relates to the ludonarrative framework and how it might be translated into classroom activity in addressing learners' ludic narrative competence:

a) Games as Evocative Spaces

Jenkins describes this as the way in which game spaces "draw upon our previously existing narrative competencies." (Jenkins 2004, n.p.). A game with a dark atmosphere that takes place in a creepy house in the middle of a dead forest could evoke prior narrative experience with the *horror genre*, while a medieval-like town filled with mythical creatures could evoke the *fantasy genre*. These evocative spaces establish expectations for the narrative. Such expectations can be teased out from:

- **Known narrative genres**: e.g. fantasy, science fiction, horror;
- **Familiar storyworlds**: such as those based on adaptations of specific narratives (e.g. the game *80 Days* as adapted from the original novel by Jules Verne), those derived from transmedial properties and franchises (e.g. Star Wars, Marvel) or that are otherwise referential (the game *Don't Starve* which evokes a Tim Burton-esque visual style without being directly associated with the director);
- **Textual assemblages:** Particularly in interface fictions where one navigates an interface (computer, phone, letters) rather than playing an embodied avatar (further discussion in Chapter 7.2.2.), such games feature collections of text inside an interface. What textual genres and conventions are evoked within such an interface? What does this tell you about the time, place, and narrative situation? For example, in *Blackbar,* which features typewritten letters on an otherwise blank screen versus in *Bury my, my love*, which features a smartphone interface.

As Jenkin's has further stated, in evoked narratives "spatial design can either enhance our sense of immersion within a familiar world or communicate a fresh perspective on that story through the altering of established details." (ibid. n.p.). In addressing this aspect of narrative design, learners may be asked to consider:

- What narrative genres or known storyworlds are evoked by the settings and characters you've seen so far? Learners can be prompted to make explicit reference to other related media, such as film, literature, etc.
- Based on what you know about these genres, what characters do you expect to see, what settings, what kinds of abilities might the characters have, what story beats might you anticipate?
- Consider other media/game titles you've been exposed to in the past: What do you like about these genres? What do you dislike about these genres? What elements need to be there to make stories in this genre "good stories"? How can games – where you can control some action – innovate in this genre?
- After learners have played for a while: To what degree did the game meet, exceed, or underserve the expectations you had at the start?
- If they were to imagine themselves as game designers, what would they contribute to a game title? For instance, in the following scenario: 'You have joined the design team of a game halfway through the project as a narrative architect. Based on the genre, the characters and locations you've seen so far, design what you think should happen next and how these things will happen through the rest of the game.'

b) Games as Enacted Stories

From this view, Jenkins describes game environments as a "staging ground where narrative events are enacted" (ibid., n.p.). This category resonates strongly with this dissertation's conceptualization of complementary and entangled ludonarrativity, as such 'enacted' events can be witnessed (e.g. as in filmic cutscenes; as frequently features in complementary ludonarrativity) and/or performed (e.g. as in choice-based dialogues; as frequently features in entangled ludonarrativity). In attending to the role of the gameworld as a navigable space, Jenkins additionally notes how these enactments (i.e. ludonarrative arrangements) can function to "retard or accelerate" plot trajectories as players move through this world (ibid., n.p.). In other words, what is the rhythm of witnessed and performed story events against other actions and routines

involved in navigating the gameworld? As explored within the notion of complementary and entangled ludonarrativity, the rhythm will be quite distinct and dispersed in a complementary ludonarrative, and tighter or overlapping in an entangled ludonarrative. In making these distinctions more approachable for learners, learners can be asked to distinguish between routine and novel (often story relevant) events. Different productive tasks can aid in distinguishing routine action from novel story events: For example, routine action could be elucidated through learners creating a journal entry on "An ordinary day in the life of my player-character", whereas novel, story-progressing action could be elucidated through learners e.g creating a storyboard for a filmic adaptation of the game.

c) Games as Embedded Narratives

This aspect refers to narrative information as it is embedded in the *mise-en-scene* of the gameworld, i.e. narrative information that can be "read" from the environment. Jenkins uses the example of a player entering a hallway where the door has been broken and there is blood on the floor. The player not only has an idea as to what events may have already transpired here but also what events await them on the other side of the doorway. Jenkins refers to the game space as "a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot". Many Walking Simulator games, such as *Gone Home*, rely extensively on embedded narrative information. Game screen shots or screencasts can be used to have learners attend to embedded narrative information. For example in the treatment of the game, *Her Story,* as this was addressed in Chapter 4.3., learners are asked to look at the starting moments of the game in which one sees a database on a dated desktop screen. The starting word typed into the search bar is 'MURDER' and one sees thumbnails of video clips that feature the same woman in an interview situation. This already communicates relevant narrative information before one even begins to watch the video clips: the story is about a murder and this woman is somehow involved. In moving the database screen, one can see the desktop image underneath, which features a crest and the words "Constabulary" making it clear that this is a police database and suggests that the film clips are from a police investigation. Learners can be prompted to tease out such narrative information before they are tasked with acting in the gameworld: "Where are we?", "Who are we?", "What has happened already?", "What do you think will happen next?".

d) Games as Emergent Narratives

Emergent narrative involves one's own individual journey within a game. Within this view, even *Tetris* could be considered a narrative game – you are the protagonist fighting against the machine; at first, you tentatively learn the mechanics and experience a growing conflict

between yourself and the relentless falling of blocks; and then the catharsis of mastering certain maneuvers and of getting further into the game than you had managed before. Within this view, the gameworld is a narrative sandbox: It provides elements for the player to traverse and/or configure into their own narratives. This can be more obvious than in the example of *Tetris*, such as in the *The Sims* where players are overtly tasked with constructing their own stories through the characters and settings they build and the interactions between characters that they instigate.

As addressed in Chapter 4, one relevant gap in regarding narrative games as task environments is the *experience gap* that exists between different people's playthroughs. Here we might distinguish between affective differences vs. structural differences. In terms of structural differences, games such as *80 Days* or *Bury me, my love* feature structurally different narrative pathways – where one's choices collaborate with the game system to open and close particular story lines. Two players will have access to a structurally different version of the narrative in their individual playthroughs. In terms of affective differences, even where players play a game that allows very limited and iterative player action (*Tetris*), the affective journey of these players through the game will be different – one person may thrive on the challenge, another may become more quickly annoyed and end their journey with the game. In attending to emergent narrative, one is also attending to the performative nature of narrative play: The difference between scripted action and improvisational action and how both are involved in the co-construction of meaning between the gameworld and player – We have freedom to act within the constraints of the gameworld as we like, but we also rely on the gameworld to respond to our action and tell us the ways in which our actions are meaningful within the semiotic domain of this specific game.

In having players explore how their individual roles play out within the peformative space of the game, the resulting experience gaps learners have between their playthroughs can be interrogated: Where did you spend the most time in the game? Which sections engaged you most vs. which sections did you want to progress through quickly or skip entirely? How are my interests and values reflected in my playthrough vs. yours in your playthrough?

In addition to Jenkin's framework, some additional considerations might be taken into account in addressing and fostering learners' ludic narrative competence:

- **Sensitivity to the procedural designs of choice-based narratives:** This includes not just the overall shape of narratives with simple branching paths, but also sensitivity to the procedural building blocks – the conditionals and variables – which can be leveraged in creating more enduring variations in playthroughs (as described in Chapter 2.3.2.). This

sensitivity is needed for learners to recognize (or to begin to recognize) the narrative constraints on player action. These designs can make it easier for learners to parse when they are being offered a narrative-altering choice vs. the illusion of choice within the game. When do my actions contribute to *which* narrative is enacted (structural variability) vs. my own experience of one possible narrative pathway (affective variability)? This aspect is best explored through ludonarratives that make frequent use of such structures: e.g. *80 Days, Heaven's Vault, Bury me, my love* [100].

- **Bridging of ludonarrative gaps both in the task environment of the game and of the classroom:** Engaging with narrative games as task environments and the negotiation of meaning that occurs inside the game and outside of it. To reintroduce the kinds of ludonarrative gaps that might be exploited in working with narrative games, here again is the table as it was first introduced in Chapter 4.2.3.:

Table 19: Ludonarrative gaps as negotiations of meaning in digital games

	Within the Game	Around the Game
Information Gaps	**Familiarization with the semiotic domain of the game** –Confronting the unknown through exploration. Discovering how to unlock and interact with the mechanics of the game. Finding orientation within the possibility space of this particular gameworld and learning how to act in it; i.e. *discoursing* within the game's semiotic domain; Gee 2015 ***(Orientation Gap).***	**Sharing different play experiences and providing play support** – What happened in your game versus in mine? ***(Experience Gap),*** How can I/we solve this puzzle? How can I/we move forward? Resolving this collaboratively, but also looking for solutions elsewhere (e.g. online forums).
Reasoning Gaps	**Solving game puzzles** –particularly convenient are those that involve the target language or that are tied to the narrative situation of the game; ***Figuring out how to navigate, unlock, participate in the game's narrative** – Can be quite variable depending on the game. For instance: *A Normal Lost Phone:* Searching through the phone for clues in order to unlock more content by e.g. finding a password for unlocking internet access in the phone's archive of text messages; *Heaven's Vault* and *Blackbar:* Decoding the language puzzles that are tied to story beats; *Obra Dinn:* Deducing what happened to the ship's occupants through	**Solving game puzzles through co-play** – including those that do not include linguistic signs *per se;* ***Figuring out how to navigate, unlock, participate in the narrative together** – Playing the game in groups and reasoning through these same narrative puzzles together. Players can be encouraged to hypothesize together outside of gameplay before trying out their hypotheses in the game.

[100] Not coincidentally, all of these games have been created using the same narrative scripting language, *ink*, by Inkle studios. In other words, the tool itself affords a particular narrative approach.

	engaging with audio clips and 3D-tableaus of the game's scrambled narrative moments.	
Opinion Gaps	***Configuring a narrative** – especially in games that involve making meaningful choices and role playing. E.g. by creating a character with a particular set of abilities or by choosing between narrative options (exercising "projective identity" à la Gee 2003) (e.g. *Disco Elysium*, *Stanley's Parable).*	***Comparing what choices made, why such choices were made, what makes these choices meaningful** –Furthermore, evaluating the consequences of choices and what this indicates regarding the worldview of the game. Sharing interpretations of ludic and narrative themes. ***(Experience Gap + Ludic Narrative Competence)***

- **A critical perspective in addressing authored ideologies in game narratives**: In looking at the consequences that have been designed around player action – one might additionally consider what ideologies are represented in these authored outcomes to player action? And, as such, in playing this game, to what degree am I enacting someone else's ideological scripts? As a creative intervention, learners can be asked to choose a critical moment in a game they have played and asked to consider: if you were the narrative architect, what do *you* think the consequence should have been in this moment? Compare your approach against what actually happened. As an advanced or more involved intervention, learners can create their own short narrative game (using, for instance, *InkleWriter;* see also Chapter 6.2.3.) that demonstrates these variations on the narrative they were exposed to. A critical perspective also involves an understanding of how a game can be seen to be in conversation with surrounding cultural discourses – an aspect that will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

Addressing the above facets of ludic narrative competence has the potential to intersect with various formalized agendas of formal TEFL education – especially in terms of drawing text- and media competencies into the realms of digital literacy (see Chapter 2.2.1.). I propose that the procedurality of game narratives are an aestheticization of dynamics that are of central concern in digital education – especially the navigation of algorithmic ambiguity inherent when one engages with digital tools and services. It forces us to consider: To what degree are my actions and the products of my actions my own and to what degree do they belong to the machine? (See also Chapter 8.2.)

6. Narrative digital games as cultural discourse

It can be argued that all media – along with all gameful practices – are *in conversation with* and *a part of* larger cultural discourses – whether in ways intended by their designers and players or not. This chapter will attend to how narrative games perform as cultural discourse and how learners contribute to cultural discourse as participants in gamer cultures. Before digging into these aspects, it is first necessary to delineate how cultural discourse is understood within this dissertation.

The notion of culture – just like the aforementioned notions of narrative, game, task or text – is under a constant process of re-negotiation in the academic sphere. This dissertation accommodates a broad view of culture, but with recognition that the particular orientation one takes to culture in language education can constrain and highlight potentials of particular media for the classroom in different ways. In other words, one's orientation to culture contributes to the evaluative apparatus that educators use in evaluating media for the language classroom[101], which in turn implicates the designs for learning that may be implemented. Culture here can refer to more than just national and/or ethnic cultures and subcultures – and indeed acknowledges the ways in which such categories of cultural belonging can be problematic (See Hall 2017).[102] Cultural domains can be of any shape and size but they consist of practices of meaning making which groups of people – however they are distributed in physical and digital space – participate in and co-construct (see Kramsch 2014).

As has been the case throughout this dissertation, the notion of discourse adopted here is in keeping with Gee's big-D Discourse as socially and culturally-situated practices of making meaning – rather than small-d discourse which refers to "any stretch of language in use" (Gee 2015).[103] In a similar vein, Stuart Hall described his view of discourse as "not a set of textual

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[101] Wolfgang Welsch – whose delineation of transculturality has been taken up frequently in discussions of cultural learning withing *Englischdidaktik* – also spoke about culture as a heuristic: "Conceptions of culture are not just descriptive concepts, but operative concepts. Our understanding of culture is an active factor in our cultural life." (Welsch 1999, 200)

[102] The notions of nation, ethnicity and race were described by cultural theorist Stuart Hall in one lecture series as the "fateful triangle". To his view, nation, ethnicity and race are notions of cultural difference that carry "histories of oppression, perpetuating dangerous group-think while reinforcing hierarchical notions of cultural difference." (Gates 2017, xiv; in Hall 2017).

[103] This is not too dissimilar from the three interrelated aspects of discourse proposed by Norman Fairclough, one of the most prominent theoreticians in Critical Discourse Analysis: discourse "as a text (spoken or written); as an interaction between people involving processes of producing and interpreting the text; and as part of a piece of social action" (Flowerdew 2013, 179). These aspects are interrelated whereby social action and text are "mediated by interaction" (ibid.).

pyrotechnics but rather an overall view of human conduct as always meaningful" (Hall 2017, 31).[104] The notion of discourse as conduct, action, or practices hails back to the work of Michael Foucault. His approach to discourse is notably also cited by Barad – whose theories are foundational to the theoretical approach of this dissertation (Chapter 1.2) – whereby discourses "are not merely 'groups of signs' but 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, 49)." (Barad 2018, 204). Discourse from Foucault's view does not just *represent* the world, it "acts on *and in* the world" making it "a constitutive part of reality." (Munif 2010, 3). Referring to *cultural discourse* and not just to *culture* emphasizes culture as enacted in practices and the ways in which any person (e.g. learners) or text (e.g. gametexts) associated with a cultural domain can *do* and *inform* culture in diverse ways.

In consideration of the ways in which narrative digital games can be framed as cultural discourse: A piece of media can act *as* and *with* cultural discourse in different ways, for example:

- **Digital games as thematic content:** How the themes embedded in a game and player impressions derived from a game can be taken up and become a part of cultural conversations. Games can participate in cultural conversations that the game's designers explicitly wanted the game to be a part of – e.g. in the case of *Bury me, my love* which was deliberately authored to comment on attitudes towards forced migration between Syria and Europe – or can become a part of conversations largely on the initiative of their audiences – e.g. through commentators and critics who might highlight the misogynistic representations of women in a particular digital game.
- **Digital games as cultural artefacts and productions:** This attends to the material dimension of games, for example: how games come to be produced and disseminated (e.g. Who are the game designers? Where is the studio? Who are the publishers? Where is the game sold? What audiences have access to this media?). These aspects relate to where the cultural discourses of games are situated and come to be and how they are entangled in other material architectures (What devices are needed to play the game? How are these infrastructures and technologies acquired and operated?) and how games shape interaction in how they are used (What social arrangements are possible within the physical situation of gameplay?).

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[104] "As we set out to ask what it means to rethink cultural difference in discursive terms, discourse should be understood as that which gives human practice and institutions meaning, that which enables us to make sense of the world, and hence that which makes human practices meaningful practices that belong to history precisely because they signify in the way they mark out human differences." (Hall 2017, 31-32)

- **Digital games and their attendant genres of participation**: This relates to social practices and the genres of participation that are associated with games – i.e. the attendant discourse practices that can (and are typically) conducted with and around the media, which then generates even more meaning within a cultural domain: e.g. in the case of digital games, "*discoursing*" (the act of contributing to social discourses; see Gee 2015, 3) as it occurs in forums, gaming blogs and news outlets, social media, streaming platforms, and through conversation in the non-digital world – whether e.g. on the playground, at the dinner table, or in the classroom.

The following sub-chapters will attend to how different frames for cultural learning in TEFL (as derived from *Landeskunde*, intercultural learning, transcultural learning, critical and political education, and discourse perspectives on learning) inform the evaluation and curation of digital games both as cultural content and practices in the language classroom.

6.1. Framing and evaluating games as cultural media

Any evaluation of digital games as cultural discourse is contingent on the approach(es) to cultural learning that are seen to be of value in TEFL since different approaches can provide significantly different framing for the varieties and roles of cultural discourse that are seen as productive as TEFL learning processes and objectives. Within the literature on the historical development of cultural learning in the German TEFL context, what is commonly depicted is a transition from an 'area studies' or *Landeskunde* approach, to a focus on intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997), to transcultural, poststructural and critical re-evaluations of the cultural, and a discourse perspective that is especially sensitive to learner lifeworlds (see Kramsch 2014; Pennycook 1999; Volkman 2010; Freitag-Hild 2019; Hallet 2002; Gee 2004). In summarizing these developments, particular attention will be paid to how media (i.e. digital games) can be regarded as cultural content and practices across approaches to cultural learning – i.e. games as target culture (Chapter 6.1.1.), games as intercultural encounter (Chapter 6.1.2.), games as sites of negotiations (of identity, belonging, ideology) (Chapter 6.1.3), and games as situated in gamer discourse cultures (Chapter 6.2.).

6.1.1. Games as target culture

Evaluating digital games as target culture involves a concern for texts that are seen to be in some way *representative* of cultural groups, contexts and phenomena that are deemed important for

learners to be made aware of. The concern for target culture predates inter- and transcultural approaches to learning in TEFL (which will be addressed in the following sections) as evidenced, for instance, in the *Landeskunde* approach to cultural learning that dominated in Germany until the intercultural turn began to take hold in the mid-to-late 80s (Delanoy & Volkmann 2006). *Landeskunde* was most concerned with learners acquiring knowledge relating to those nations whose versions of English learners were meant to emulate as closely as possible – i.e. UK and USA. This frequently played out as a 'guide book' approach to culture where generally positive (or at least neutral) surface cultural features of target nations – relating to geography, politics, demographics and high culture – were transmitted to learners (ibid.). Although a preference for other approaches in academic discourse became common from the mid-to-late 80s, it can be argued that the spirit of *Landeskunde* is still well represented in German curricula and classrooms although the 'guide book' has now expanded to include a wider range of target cultures – e.g. the English-speaking 'outer circle' nations along with minority or sub-cultures of the English-speaking 'inner circle'[105] – and target cultural considerations where not just the most prestigious or uncontentious facets of such cultures is considered of value, but also core tensions (e.g. issues of class, ethnicity, gender) and alternate cultural canons (popular culture alongside high culture; new literatures). Within this expansion of the notion of target culture, a *Landeskunde* perspective is perhaps maintained when the primary interest lies in transmitting knowledge to learners in a way that keeps them 'neutrally' informed on key cultural factors – and is less concerned with what learners might do with such knowledge, how they might negotiate interactions in different cultural contexts or discursive spheres, or the degree to which such cultural representations border and intersect with leaners' own cultural identities and cultural affiliations. In other words, although the content has been updated, the learner remains cast in the role of an informed 'armchair tourist'.[106]

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[105] As relates to Kachru's distinction of inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle of English-speaking nations, whereby the inner circle consists of nations where English is spoken as the primary first language, the outer circle consists of nations where English is one of several first languages spoken and where it typically features as the language of ceremony and bureaucracy – a situation common in former English colonies –, and the expanding circle refers to nations where English is learned as a foreign language (Kachru 1985).

[106] This is perhaps especially apparent in materials for younger learners or for learners who are not considered fully conversational in the language to be able to negotiate cultural understandings – or, alternatively, in materials that are introducing potentially sensitive cultural material which could impact a diverse group of learners in different ways (i.e. topics of migration; discrimination as applies to minority groups) and/or which learners would need significant exposure to before a negotiation of stances could be approached sensitively (e.g. on *Black Lives Matter*). This is perhaps particularly true where those designing or curating the material are trying to retain a degree of neutrality.

In viewing a digital game as a target cultural text, a game is considered useful for the language classroom according to two concerns: *which* target cultures and their attendant cultural elements and discourses are considered important for learners to engage with, and how *representative* content is seen to be in relation to the chosen target culture. Within secondary schools in Bavaria, the state curricula – the LehrplanPLUS – has articulated target cultural foci within the *Themengebiete* outlined for English at each grade level and within each school form. As an example, see Table 20:

Table 20: Target cultural themes as articulated in the Themengebiete in the Fachlehrpläne for English as a Moderne Fremdsprache in the Bavarian school curriculum (Grades 5 & 10, Mittelschule, Realschule, Gymnasium; ISB 2023)

	Mittelschule	**Realschule**	**Gymnasium**
Grade 5	Großbritannien: grundlegender Einblick in die geographische und politische Gliederung aktuelle Themen und weitere Interessensgebiete der Schülerinnen und Schüler	erste Einblicke in Englisch als Weltsprache (ca. 20 Std.): geographische und politische Gliederung der Ursprungsländer (Britische Inseln) sowie weltweite Verbreitung und Bedeutung (u. a. Einflüsse im Alltagsleben) Alltagsleben in Großbritannien (ca. 45 Std.): unterschiedliche häusliche und familiäre Situationen, soziales Umfeld, Tiere, Feiertage, Essen und Trinken, Kleidung, Einkaufen, Gesundheit, Rolle als verantwortungsbewusster Verbraucher Schule in Großbritannien (ca. 25 Std.): Klasse, Schulart, Klassenkameraden, Stundenplan, Schulweg und Verkehrsmittel weitere Interessensgebiete der Schülerinnen und Schüler	Leben im sozialen Umfeld (Schwerpunkt UK): Familie, Freunde, Freizeit, Schulalltag, Wohnen, Essgewohnheiten, Tages- und Jahresablauf, Feste und Bräuche, Einkaufen erste Einblicke in die geographische und politische Gliederung der Britischen Inseln (*United Kingdom*, *Great Britain*, Irland) und Nordamerikas (USA: *Lower 48*, Hawaii und Alaska; Kanada) London, Washington D.C., New York: bedeutende Sehenswürdigkeiten
Grade 10	USA, Australien, Indien, UK und Comm onwealth: Einblicke in gesellschaftliche, kulturelle, politische und wirtschaftliche Phänomene, berühmte Persönlichkeiten aktuelle Themen und weitere Interessensgebiete der Schülerinnen und Schüler	Zukunftsperspektiven und Herausforderungen für junge Erwachsene in aller Welt (ca. 20 Std.): Schritte in die Selbständigkeit, Gesundheit, Auslandsaufenthalte und grenzüberschreitende Kommunikation Englisch als internationale Verkehrssprache (ca. 20 Std.): Handel in der globalisierten Welt (u. a. asiatischer Raum), internationale Zusammenarbeit (z. B. Geschäftsbeziehungen, Mobilität), humanitäre Projekte (z. B. *Fair Trade*) Englisch in Wissenschaft und Technik (ca. 20 Std.): Energie und Umwelt (u. a. verantwortungsvoller Umgang, erneuerbare Energien), Nachhaltigkeit und ethische Aspekte angewandter Technologien, Zukunftsaufgaben (z. B. Wasserversorgung und Ernährung) zwei weitere Länder des *Commonwealth of Nations* (z. B. Bahamas, Malta, Neuseeland, Pakistan, Südafrika, Zypern) (ca. 20 Std.):	Schottland: Einblicke in Geschichte, politische Verhältnisse, Geographie und Gesellschaft *African Americans* in den USA: Einblicke in historische Hintergründe (Sklaverei, Amerikanischer Bürgerkrieg, *Civil Rights Movement*), wichtige Persönlichkeiten (v. a. Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Barack Obama), politische Folgen und heutige Situation Jugendkultur gestern und heute: historisch, sozial und individuell sowie durch technologischen Fortschritt bedingte Wertvorstellungen und Verhaltensweisen, auch unter Berücksichtigung von *gender*-Fragen Musik im gesellschaftlichen Kontext, z. B. *Black Music*, *Punk Rock*

		Einblicke in die jeweiligen geographischen, kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Besonderheiten Einblicke in die englischsprachige Literatur (ca. 8 Std.): Zugang z. B. über Lektüre, Hörbuch, *graphic novel*, Verfilmung, Theater; Kenntnis ausgewählter Autoren (z. B. J. R. R. Tolkien, E. Hemingway, T. Williams, A. Miller, N. Hornby) weitere Interessensgebiete der Schülerinnen und Schüler	aktuelle Ereignisse und Entwicklungen, z. B. in Gesellschaft, Politik und digitaler Welt Literatur: ein Roman aus dem 20./21. Jahrhundert (ggf. aus dem Bereich Jugendliteratur) als Ganzschrift; kürzere literarische Texte (z. B. Romanauszug, Dramenauszug, *short story*, Gedicht, Song); Filmausschnitte (ggf. mit Untertiteln)

In terms of what is regarded as appropriate target cultural aspects for the classroom to take up, we see from Grade 5 to Grade 10 a shift:

- from inner circle English speaking countries (e.g. UK, USA) to the outer circle (i.e. the Commonwealth) – but always in that order;
- from a focus on the nation to a focus on sub- and trans-cultural groups (e.g. urban, rural & youth culture, "*African Americans"*);
- from traditional literary canons ("J. R. R. Tolkien, E. Hemingway, T. Williams, A. Miller, N. Hornby") to the inclusion of popular and increasingly multimodal media ("*Musik", "Hörbuch", "graphic novel", "Verfilmung"*);
- from 'safe' facts and figures regarding nation states ("*Leben im sozialen Umfeld (Schwerpunkt UK): Familie, Freunde, Freizeit, Schulalltag, Wohnen, Essgewohnheiten, Tages- und Jahresablauf, Feste und Bräuche, Einkaufen")* to more critical cultural themes (the USA as relates to "*Sklaverei, Amerikanischer Bürgerkrieg, Civil Rights Movement"; "Jugendkultur gestern und heute: historisch, sozial und individuell sowie durch technologischen Fortschritt bedingte Wertvorstellungen und Verhaltensweisen, auch unter Berücksichtigung von gender-Fragen*");
- and, at least in the Mittelschule and Realschule, room is explicitly granted to bring in content of value to the learners (e.g "*aktuelle Themen und weitere Interessensgebiete der Schülerinnen und Schüler*")

A *Lehrplan* such as this makes the question of which games to recruit as target culture transparent. It should be noted that in actual classroom practice, target cultures and topics can be derived from other sources as well: based on what is articulated in pre-existing teaching materials and in other media and materials that have been curated for the classroom, based on teacher and learner interests and current events, as well as based on cross-curricular priorities (e.g. digital education; civic education). Regardless, within a target cultural view, the digital games likely to be

curated for the language classroom are those that in one way or another are 'situated' in target cultures in an identifiable way. To give an example of games that might qualify here:

- **Games that are set in particular places or told by development teams from an identifiable cultural perspective:** *Venba* as a game that tells the story of a south Indian family that has emigrated to Canada; *Gone Home* as a game set in an upper middle class American home in the early 90's; *Where the water tastes like wine* where one's character travels across the United States and engages with different folk tales; as well as popular triple-A games like *Fallout* or *Assassin's Creed* which take place in famous cities, often with a dystopic and fantastical twist.
- **Games that are based on other target media, such as literature:** *Midsummer Night's Dream* was a game produced with funding from the British Council and gamifies scenes from the Shakespearian play; *80 Days* which is an expansive adaptation of Jules Verne's *Around the world in 80 days*; *Hogwarts Legacy* as the newest of a whole slew of games situated in the popular (if not uncontroversial) Harry Potter franchise.
- **Games that are based on critical target cultural issues**: *Voter suppression trail* which is about voter suppression tactics in the United States; *Bury me, my love* which is about forced migration during the Syrian War between Syria and Europe; *Horizon Zero Dawn* which is a postapocalyptic tale with ecocritical and technocritical facets.

This approach only specifies what games might be relevant to target cultures that are prioritized in TEFL in the German – especially Bavarian – educational context. Work with such games can go beyond surface-level engagement with the game as representative of target cultures – as will be considered further in the following sub-chapters.

6.1.2. Games as intercultural encounter

In the mid-80s a shift began to occur in cultural learning away from *Landeskunde* and into a focus on intercultural learning, which involved not just a consideration of target cultural knowledge, but on the skills and attitudes learners might need to negotiate contact with people from other cultures, English-speaking or not. In considering the shift from *Landeskunde* or 'area studies' to intercultural communicative competence, John Corbett describes a challenge to cultural learning that was somewhat specific to *English* language learning due to its status as a lingua franca (i.e. as relates to ELF, English as a Lingua Franca) (Corbett 2022). Within an ELF-informed approach to CLT, consideration is given to the fact that much of the English spoken in the world occurs

within groups of non-native speakers of the language – which raises the question as to what degree these interlocutors should be held to native speaker standards, both linguistically speaking (e.g. does it really matter if two non-native speakers omit the third person -s in conversation?) and in terms of the degree to which cultural content specific to the English 'core' should be valued in the process of teaching. The latter concern especially is evident in contemporary English language programs focusing on internationalist or commercially-oriented versions of communicative language teaching – i.e. language learning for the purpose of *doing work* rather than as part of a humanistic educational program (Corbett 2022) – the latter of which is still arguably somewhat a priority in the formal educational system of Germany, e.g. within the notion of *Bildung*. The rise of intercultural learning responded to this lingua franca movement in suggesting that even communication between non-native English speakers is prone to culturally-rooted dysfunction and misunderstanding. Byram's well established model for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) proposes that intercultural communication is not just a matter of knowledge of each other's culture and of a shared language system, but also requires skills and attitudes that help interlocutors of different (i.e. national) cultures bridge gaps in intercultural knowledge and communicative intention (Byram 1997). Additionally, an intercultural approach is often concerned with the learner's identity formation as they find orientation in the context of contact with the 'cultural other'. As stated, for instance, in the CEFR: "In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture." (CEFR 2001, 1). In moving beyond acquisition of knowledge and into the development of attitudes and skills, different materials and practices may be recruited into the classroom. Options might include participating in intercultural exchanges or participating in simulated intercultural encounters (e.g. through role play) (Corbett 2010). Within intercultural learning, *content* can also be framed as a kind of intercultural encounter. Within this view, a 'reader-response' approach to literature has been seen as productive where the interpretational openness afforded by literary or other expressive and aesthetic texts fosters skills and attitudes that are the target of an intercultural approach – including multi-perspectivity, the active negotiation of meaning, while affording a certain degree of critical distance from one's own cultural entanglements (Freitag-Hild 2019). In terms of curating content within an intercultural approach, media chosen often still falls within a notion of 'target culture' where the media is taken to be representative of a kind of cultural experience within the broader range of cultures that are considered relevant to the TEFL classroom. The difference is that classroom activity would move beyond knowledge acquisition and into activity

that involves learners' skills and attitudes in negotiating the material. Additionally, media without an identifiable 'target culture' might be curatable within this view – for example, media depicting fictitious cultures and imaginary worlds – so long as the themes of such works are considered suitable for fostering skills of interaction and favorable intercultural attitudes through negotiations of perspective.

Of course, unlike analogue texts that are typically leveraged in literary learning, digital games are unlike other media in that they offer more than a receptive role to players as they are used. The activity that players can undertake within a game draws together both a text-orientation to intercultural encounters (i.e. digital games serving in the same capacity as literature) as well as a performative one (i.e. digital gameplay serving in the same capacity as role-play and simulation). In viewing digital games as intercultural encounters, I would like to proffer three kinds of encounter that are specific to this dynamic between text and performance in digital games as media: a) digital games as mediating intercultural encounters between human players, b) the player vs. gameworld as a simulation of intercultural encounters, and c) the player/player-character dynamic as an intercultural encounter:

a) Digital games as mediating intercultural encounters between human players

From this view, the digital gameworld – as well as its surrounding affinity spaces (e.g. online forums) – can be used to facilitate intercultural encounters between human players. This is particularly true for multiplayer games where the digital game is used to mediate both spoken and written interactions between players (see Thorne 2010). Where communication between players serves to better meet game goals, interactions could be considered as part of a task-based framework (see also Chapter 4). As this dissertation is primarily concerned with single-player narrative games, this aspect will not be considered further here.

b) The gameworld as a simulation of intercultural encounters

Narrative digital games are simulated fictional worlds: there are places to visit, objects with their own functions and meanings to discover, and NPCs to interact with. Games as uniquely authored semiotic domains (Chapter 2.2.2) can be considered an aesthetic and fictionalized realization of what it feels like to be somewhere completely new, where the material and social world around you needs to be decoded, and where this process of interpreting the world is essential for moving smoothly within it. The richness of experience offered by finding orientation in a gameworld relies on how well designed the gameworld is as an explorable space and as an authored text where e.g. conversations with NPCs are fully scripted. A gameworld that is considered immersive, semiotically rich and engaging, surprising, and where interactions with

NPCs are challenging and varied, is theoretically more likely to offer reflective material for intercultural learning. How to approach these semiotic worlds with interpretive openness, to take cues from the gameworld, to look things up and ask for help when needed – could all be taken up for reflection in the intercultural classroom.

One serious issue with this approach is where taking on an avatar of a different cultural background is taken as direct experience of what it is like to *be* someone of another culture. It is not uncommon for literature on game-based learning to assert that in taking on a game role, players get to "walk a mile in someone else's shoes". This can be regarded as a problematic sentiment however, as I have written elsewhere:

> "There have been controversies with independent game designers feeling that the intensely personal experiences they have expressed through games have been simplistically appropriated by educational actors seeking to use these games as didactic objects. In one famous exchange, game designer Anna Anthropy called out a New York teacher who shared via Twitter her positive experiences with using Anthropy's game *Dys4ia* in the classroom to help her learners empathize with trans experiences. Anthropy tweeted: "if you are a cis person & you think you've 'learned empathy for trans women' by playing dys4ia, you are wrong. flush yrself (sic) down the toilet" (Anthropy 2014; D'Anastasio 2015). As further argued by games empathy researcher, Douglas Gentile, although "[g]ames help you understand something outside of your normal experience […] that's different from understanding someone else's experience" (D'Anastasio 2015, n.p.). A literary approach to digital games can be useful in navigating this complexity as it treats games as expressive texts in their own right, rather than as end-user focused commodities for either education or entertainment. As has been emphasized in intercultural approaches to literary learning, although engaging with expressive texts can afford opportunities for learners to engage with other perspectives, this does not mean such perspectives are immediately overtaken by the learner. Rather, expressive texts – particularly when explored alongside a constellation of other texts that negotiate similar themes (Hallet 2002) – offer the opportunity for learners to subjectively experience, articulate and negotiate a multitude of perspectives alongside their individual perspectives that may be equally shifting and dynamic (Freitag-Hild 2019). Interculturally sensitive literary readings therefore take for granted the diverse array of subjective experience offered by a text, rather than objective judgements about what a text might ultimately mean for learners or authors." (Stannard 2022, 105-106)

In response to this misconception of how far playing a role in a digital equates to taking on new perspectives, more can be said within the next subchapter on digital games as sites of negotiation (of identity, of belonging, of ideology).

c) The player / player-character dynamic as an intercultural encounter

In contrast to the assertion that playing a game role equates to 'walking a mile in another's shoes', Gee describes a "tripartite play of identities" that players are implicated in when they, as real people, take on the role of a virtual character. I would argue that this negotiation of *virtual*, *real-world* and *projective* identities could also qualify as an intercultural encounter where one deliberately regards their player-character as someone *other* that one develops a relationship to

through play. To describe these three identities in more detail, Gee uses as an example his own experience playing the RPG[107], *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, in which he chose to play as a female Half-Elf named "Bead Bead" (Gee 2003, 52-58). The first identity he considers is the *virtual identity* or the 'character' as it appears and/or is configured within the gameworld. This includes all the things a playable character is able to do in the game based on their virtual characteristics (His example: Passing a skill check[108] in the game which requires his character to have high intelligence and persuasion in order to experience a particular outcome). The second identity is his *real-world identity*, or the player as they are in the real-world. He uses the example:

> "I am a professor, a linguist, an Anglo American, a middle-age male baby boomer, a parent, an avid reader, a middle-class person initially raised outside the middle class, a former devout Catholic, a lover of movies, and so on through a great many other identities […] these identities become relevant only as they affect and are filtered through my identity as a video-game player playing Arcanum. And, indeed, any one of my real-world identities can be so engaged whenever I am playing Arcanum. Which of these identities, for instance, was at play— positively or negatively—when I got such joy at having Bead Bead pick rich people's pockets? When I chose to be a female Half-Elf in the first place? When I chose to use my [skill] points to make her as strong and good as a male at melee fighting with a sword?" (Gee 2003, 55).

Notable here is that he doesn't claim that in playing a female character he has a female experience of any kind, but rather that this choice is one that stems from some engagement with his real-world personality as an Anglo American male. The final identity is a *projective identity* where one "projects one's values and desires onto the virtual character" and sees "the virtual character as one's own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time based on my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become (within the limits of her capabilities, of course, and within the resources the game designer has given me)." (Gee 2003, 50). He states that "A good role-playing game makes me think new thoughts about what I value and what I do not value" (Gee 2004, 300), but this does not equate to losing sight of one's own identity in the process of taking on a game role. He does however argue that this tripartite play of identities:

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[107] RPG: Role-Playing Game

[108] Skill check: Where the outcome of a game encounter depends on character variables (i.e. their skills). For example, in RPG's, character features like high charisma or high intelligence can help pass dialogue-based skill checks (e.g. if I have high charisma while talking to a potential opponent, then I might be able to talk my way out of a fight rather than needing to battle).

> "transcends identification with characters in novels or movies, for instance, because it is both *active* (the player actively does things) and *reflexive*, in the sense that once the player has made some choices about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can now do. The virtual character rebounds back on the player and affects his or her future actions." (Gee 2003, 53-54)

Arguably, however, this *reflexive* potential inherent to a player considering their own values in connection to this fictional character that they have co-constructed within the gameworld is reliant on the player adopting a particular mindset. Byram would perhaps describe this within the attitudinal dimension of his model of intercultural communicative competence as a willingness to "de-center" – to suspend to whatever degree possible one's own perceptions in their engagements with the *other* (Byram 1997). This is a perspective that requires effort on the part of the player and will not follow simply from taking on the role. Here is where *literary* intercultural readings of gametexts (see also Chapter 5) can offer opportunities to engage in such negotiations. This last example would also fit into the next subchapter which considers games as sites of negotiation of identity/belonging/ideology.

Finally, this perspective is prone to the same pitfalls that are common to intercultural roleplays and intercultural readings of any other media. Depending on how well authored the gameworld is, a game is still capable of being rife with stereotypes, can simulate problematic encounters with game characters, and can offer only shallow opportunities for cultural engagement and reflection. A game can also simulate a purely efficiency view of intercultural communication: the player seeks to get the best results from the game and so acts in such a way to achieve those results. Additionally, in comparison to an encounter involving actual people, the stakes are quite low, and so a player can exhibit game behaviour that is entirely detached from how they would behave in 'real life'. As was also addressed in the previous chapter on games as expressive texts, the authored nature of narrative digital games can be understated, whereas too much emphasis is put on a player's freedom of action and not on the degree to which the game's constraints encourage action that is in keeping with the game developers' ideological leanings. To address these aspects, the next sub-chapter offers some insight.

6.1.3. Games as sites of negotiation (e.g. of identity / belonging / ideology)

It is important to note that criticisms of the intercultural perspective as presented so far have arisen over time, including that it offers a utopic view of cultural contact: i.e. A presumption of communication as amongst social equals with a shared vision of cooperation and mutual

betterment; It does not cover encounters that are inherently imbalanced or exploitative; Furthermore, the formulation of intercultural competence as an individual competence emphasizes intercultural encounters as within the realm of personal responsibility with little attention paid to factors outside of the individual. Modernist conceptualizations of culture have been accused of over-emphasising national cultures and underplaying the complexities of hybrid cultural identities and contested states of cultural belonging (see Kramsch 2014). This criticism finds additional footholds within the so-called "digital cultural condition" which is also hybrid, distributed and contested (Stalder 2018; see also Chapter 8). In addressing these gaps and excesses of an intercultural approach, researchers have recruited discourses from multiple theoretical perspectives, including Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Political Education, Critical Discourse Analysis, Literacies Pedagogy and Critical Pedagogy. Some insights from these perspectives are as follows:

- **Wariness towards essentialist and historically problematic depictions of culture:** For example, in attending to Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall, who problematized the notions of nation, race and ethnicity as the "fateful triangle" – i.e. as notions of cultural difference that carry "histories of oppression, perpetuating dangerous group-think while reinforcing hierarchical notions of cultural difference." (Gates 2017, xiv in Hall 2017). As Claire Kramsch has also noted: "Cultures, and especially national cultures, resonate with the voices of the powerful, and are filled with the silences of the powerless." (Kramsch 1998, 9). Wolfgang Welsch, whose depiction of transculturality remains influential in the field of *Englischdidaktik* (see Freitag-Hild 2019; Delanoy 2006), warned against heuristics of culture that by definition attend too closely to "otherness" within and between cultures – including the notions of interculturality and multiculturality – and instead calls for a view that emphasizes the porousness of cultural boundaries and configurations (Welsch 1999);
- **Embracing a more hybrid and emergent depiction of culture:** Kramsch – while not prefering the term transculturality herself – has offered comparable observations within her post-structural account of culture: "in this post-structuralist culture people's identities are no longer unitary, stable and unproblematic, but multiple, changing, and more often than not the site of conflictual allegiances and memories" (Kramsch 2014). In considering the role of cultural negotiators who are excluded or oppressed under dominant cultural authorities, postcolonial theorist Homi Bhaba has described culture as "constructed around negotiation and conflict" where "hybridization is not simply a

mixture but rather a strategic and selective appropriation of meanings; it is a way to create space for negotiators whose freedom and equality are endangered" (Bhaba 1994, 4). In utilizing Bhaba's notion of hybridity in considering the influences that have been constitutive of the so-called "digital cultural condition", Stalder continues:

> "At issue is thus a strategy for breaking down hegemonic cultural conditions, which distribute agency in a highly uneven manner, and for turning one's own cultural production - which has been dismissed by cultural authorities as flawed, misconceived, or outright ignorant - into something negotiable and independently valuable. […] Bhabha's vision of culture is one without immutable authorities, interpretations, and truths. In theory, everything can be brought to the table. This is not a situation in which anything goes, yet the central meaning of negotiation, the contextuality of consensus, and the mutability of every frame of reference - none of which can be shared equally by everyone - are always potentially negotiable." (Stalder 2018, n.p.)

Within this view, negotiation of cultural meanings isn't just a necessity for parsing through the complexity of hybrid cultural entanglements, but is a political act. Which leads to the next point:

- **Securing a platform for historically marginalized voices**: Ensuring that cultural stakeholders who have been historically marginalized have ownership of their own platform to assert their own meanings and to negotiate and contest marginalizing discourses. This is a major concern of critical pedagogy in the vein of Paulo Freire (Freire 2005, originally published in 1968) and has been taken up within critical applied linguistics (see Pennycook 1999);
- **A global perspective and activism in cultural education:** The aforementioned critical pedagogy movement involves an awareness of oppressive forces and a focus on emancipation from these forces, including in the classroom context. An attention to and call to act in response to global forces is also featured in related fields such as global education, democratic education, and digital citizenship education (see Lütge et al., eds., 2023).
- **Greater attention to youth cultures and the cultures of globalization and digitalization:** This is especially apparent in multiliteracies pedagogy – a firmly progressivist educational stance that wants to engage the cultures of learner lifeworlds in formal education (see also Chapter 2.2.2.). This perspective is well represented by the

NLG's[109] assertion that "curriculum needs to recruit learners' previous and current experiences, as well as their extra-school communities and discourses, as an integral part of the learning experience." (NLG 1996, 85). Cultures of digitalization in particular challenge modernist depictions of culture as a result of their diffractive, disembodied, decentralized, emergent characteristics.

On the whole, within this range of perspectives greater attention is paid to power dynamics as well as identity negotiation and shifting affiliations and cultural arrangements that continues to be catalyzed by processes such as colonialism, globalisation and digitalization. This involves not just appreciating the cultural 'other' but also culture as lived experience, as dynamic, emergent, and often slipping past neat definition. These perspectives are often offered as a corrective – making sure the previously invisible is visible, and that those who have historically been deprived a voice, have ownership of their own platform. This perspective can also be seen as a reaction to current processes of social change – especially globalization, of which the digital transformation of the social landscape (including of education) is a part. In viewing the learner in connection to these cultural forces, perhaps sociomaterial language can be made of use here: the learner can be seen as a cultural assemblage in intra-action with surrounding cultural assemblages. In evaluating and curating gametexts as cultural content, what considerations are additionally relevant from this view?

- Representativeness is now challenged and the very notion of 'target culture' could be deemed as potentially problematic. This perhaps works well with digital games as locating games according to traditional notions of culture is a challenge in a way that is common to digital aretfacts: disembodied, dispersed, opaque, diverse, emergent. Due to the distributed authorship of digital productions, such as digital games, it can be difficult to answer questions such as: 'Where does a game come from?' 'Whose cultural perspectives are represented here?' Within a less bounded view of culture, these questions don't need to be completely answerable for the media to still be culturally relevant.
- Such a diffracted view of culture could lead to the prioritizing of game narratives most likely to allow for complex individual and interpersonal responses, including those that

[109] NLG: The New London Group, the group of scholars who originally conceived of Multiliteracies Pedagogy (see NLG 2997)

"resist closure" (Delanoy 2015, 40; also Decke-Cornill 1994), including those that have complex, multi-dimensional characters, open endings and unfinished processes of character development. This may additionally involve relying on an *interplay* of texts rather than on singular texts (Hallet 2002) including the use of textual ensembles curated to challenge singular perspectives (Delanoy 2015);

- Texts that thematize the negotiation of belonging, identity, ideology may be of particular use from this view. Learners might be tasked with engaging in 'critical gaming' including confronting ideologies that a) are authored into game narratives (what biases are revealed when game actions resolve into a particular set of authored consequences) and b) game processes (how a game modelled on perpetual achievement, getting stronger, richer and navigating the gameworld with greater ease is an enactment of e.g. neoliberal ideologies) and c) which are re-enacted in gaming spaces (a much discussed aspect here is the practice of -isms in online gaming forums or in multiplayer gamer spaces). There is a burgeoning set of literature tackling such aspects, including Mary Flanagan's (2009) *Critical Gaming*, Kishonna L. Gray's (2020) *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*, and Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh and Chris Evan's MacArthur report (2009) on *The Civic Potential of Video Games.*
- Such a perspective may also involve recruiting texts 'from the bottom up' or from a 'learner lifeworld' perspective, rather than relying on texts that are deemed of value 'from the top down' (i.e. as involves traditional media canons and respected high-cultural media institutions). Game titles and game practices that are apart of learner lifeworlds might be recruited in order for learners to connect with the cultural processes at work in their own lives, how they perform in socially relevant spaces, and how this intersects with common themes of cultural participation and belonging. As Carolyn Blume also argues, certain forms of digital participation, such as digital gaming, can be regarded as a form of social capital – more affluent households have more access to gaming experiences – and schools have some capacity to bridge this gap of access through leveraging gaming in formal education (Blume 2019).

Examples of game titles that might fit into the above concerns:

- **Games that resist narrative closure:** In *Her Story,* the narrative situation that the player builds for themselves as part of their investigation through the database is never fully confirmed or denied by the game; Dense choice-based narratives such as *Bury me, my love, 80 Days* or *Heaven's Vault* each feature hidden variables and conditions that make

narrative pathways obscure; or *Coming Out Simulator* or *Bury me, my love* which frustrate the player's exercise of control over the ludonarrative environment;

- **Games that afford critical readings:** Any game can be addressed for its ideological orientations, but certain games thematize this. E.g. meta games – games which are themselves a comment on gaming practices and philosophies – including *The Stanley Parable*, which is an exploration of the nature of choice and authored action in digital games, or *Getting Over it with Bennet Foddy* which is an examination of the nature of failure and effort in gaming and in life. Digital games are also rife with narrative genres that are critically minded, including dystopic, post-apocalyptic, ecocritical, speculative fiction. These thematic genres are well represented in popular games, but just to list a few: *Blackbar; Horizon Zero Dawn; Fallout; Orwell, Final Fantasy 7, Heaven's Vault.*
- **Games that thematize negotiations of identity and ideology, particularly in a digitally saturated social reality**: Including, *A Normal Lost Phone,* in which you explore the phone of a teenager undergoing a dramatic identity shift; *Orwell,* in which you work for an authoritarian regime which surveils the online activity of perceived political threats*;* or *The Stanley Parable* in which you play a character who can either go along with or go against the machine (see also Chapter 7.2. for a more detailed consideration of these titles).

6.2. Exploring digital game cultures and discourse-oriented approaches

Up until now, the focus of this chapter has been on evaluating how games can be negotiated as cultural *content* within different frames of understanding culture – which is a perspective that meshes quite well with the 'games as expressive text' frame introduced in Chapter 5. In taking a cultural *discourse* perspective, the discussion now turns away from a consideration of games as content and into a consideration of games' connection to wider digital cultures and their attendant discourse practices – in particular those relating to the different roles that may be taken on when one participates in gamer cultures. In part, this is congruent with Multiliteracies Pedagogy's aforementioned initiative to "recruit learners' previous and current experiences, as well as their extra-school communities and discourses, as an integral part of the learning experience." (NLG 1996, 85). This is also position that has also been leveraged in Wolfgang Hallet's notion of *Diskurfähigkeit* (discourse competence) in language education, who argues: "*Nur durch den Bezug auf reale gesellschaftliche Diskurse können motivierende und günstige Lernbedingungen geschaffen werden, in denen die Lernenden den Unterrichtsinhalten Relevanz und Bedeutsamkeit beimessen. Die wesentlichen diskursiven und kulturellen Bezugsfelder sind eben jene, auf denen gegenwärtig auch die rasantesten*

Veränderungen stattfinden, die Domänen work (working lives), citizenship (public lives) und lifeworld (personal lives)" (Hallet 2007, 33). The domains mentioned here hearken back to Gee's notion of semiotic domains (see Chapter 2.2.2.), which includes lifeworld domains (including a person's 'everyday' discourse practices and social affiliations) and secondary or specialist domains (including social practices and discourses that extend beyond one's 'everyday' practices and affiliations[110]) whereas participating in digital game cultures can be a part of either (Gee 2003; 2004; 2015). Hallet, who developed a framework for complex tasks (*komplexe Kompetenzaufgaben*) alongside his notion of *Diskursfähigkeit*, has emphasized that learners can be considered as more than just 'language users-in-waiting' and rather as full participants in (critical) discourses of the 'real world' (to use James Paul Gee's language, as participants in semiotic domains outside of that of the classroom) (Hallet 2013). Hallet has further argued that a discourse orientation to language learning can challenge the modularity of contemporary language learning curricula, as by participating in discourses (i.e. semiotic domains), learners necessarily engage with arrangements of competences (communicative, intercultural, medial/textual – and so on) thereby representing a more holistic view of communication, textuality and language in use (ibid.). This is also a view that potentially requires a high degree of educator expertise to realise: Educators must be able to negotiate their familiarity with curricula as a whole in connection to the semiotic domains in which they are tasking their learners to take part. This moves beyond delivering examples of cultural discourse to pupils (i.e. as target cultural knowledge), to facilitating pupils' critical and creative engagement with and ownership of discourses in content and in practice. Roger Dale Jones has tied Hallet's notion of *Diskursfähigkeit* to his conceptualization of video game literacy, where he calls for teachers to "recognize the multivocality of the cultural discourse on games to include gamer discourse, and see such discourse as adding to the complexity of problem solving, world building, socialization and learning that is involved in VGL [video game literacy]" (Jones 2018, 35). Within the case studies featured in Jones's work, the emphasis was not on having learners play games for the purpose of learning the language, but rather on having learners participate in attendant game discourses through e.g. discussion and the creation of game-themed fan art. Within this vein, the following discussion seeks to define discursive roles for learners beyond 'learners playing games for the purpose of learning' and into 'learners as gamers', 'game spectators', 'game curators', 'game critics', 'game designers', etc.

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[110] Although, as Gee notes, there is a dynamic shuffling between these domains: "people move quite readily between specialist domains and their lifeworld domain" (Gee 2003, 36)

It is important to note that these roles can more or less resemble lifeworld or specialist discourses for learners – i.e. not all learners feel affiliated with game cultures, and even learners who do feel affiliated may not have experience in game specialist roles (game criticism, curation, design). Either way, there are some complexities to consider in engaging with semiotic domains that more or less overlap with learner lifeworlds. For example, from the view of Multiliteracies Pedagogy, the recruitment of lifeworld discourses into formal education is an explicit educational mission. Within this mission of 'recruiting' leaner lifeworlds into formal education, it should be noted that this can stem from different intentions on the part of educators. On the one hand, leveraging popular discourses can be seen as a bridge to having learners eventually engage with the 'higher discourses' of academic life – i.e. meeting learners where they are at in order to help them get to where they 'could' be. Such a view has been adopted by e.g. educators who have used graphic novels to develop textual competencies in learners who are otherwise reluctant readers (see Bland 2003). On the other hand, the intention might be situated in a critical approach to education where the recruitment of lifeworld discourses is meant to subvert dominant academic cultures which are seen to be grounded in imperialist, patriarchal, occidental, elitist traditions. In adopting lifeworld discourses in their classroom, educators operating from this view might be invested in overturning traditional cultural canons, challenging taken for granted values of formal education (i.e. by undermining a 'banking model of education'; see Freire 2005), and making space for traditionally marginalized groups to occupy positions of intellectual and cultural prestige on their own terms. This also ties into Carolyn Blume's argument that exposure to digital games is a kind of cultural capital and schools can play a role in granting equitable access to this capital (Blume 2019).

Within this range of intentions, it should further be noted that recruiting lifeworld discourses into formal education is not without its issues. Jonathon Reinhardt emphasises that everyday media practices are tied up in learner identities. He warns that classroom activity that engages with these practices might infringe upon learner agency or privacy and may be rejected as a result: "Requiring learners to friend or follow one another or the instructor or forcing learners to comment on one another's blog posts critically, for example, may be unpopular." (Reinhardt 2022, 74). Similarly, within one of Jones's case studies where learners were engaged in conversation about games and gamer culture, Jones noted that learners seemed unenthusiastic with the teacher's attempt (a teacher who was not a game enthusiast themselves) to address their at home gameplay practices critically ('games as blessing or curse') (Jones 2018, 203-208). The consequences of such an encroachment into learners' lifeworlds can range from educators coming across as 'out of touch' to a feeling of educators 'colonizing' learner lifeworlds in forcing

these alternate cultures into a shape that can be appreciated within the strictures of formal education. Other learners may find it jarring to have game cultures as a lifeworld domain attributed to them when they do not, in fact, feel affiliated with game cultures. As further commented by Gee:

> "Social languages are tied to socially situated identities and activities (i.e., people use them to do things while acting as certain kinds of people with characteristic viewpoints, values, and ways of acting, talking, and believing). People can only see a new social language as a gain if they recognize and understand the sorts of socially situated identities and activities that recruit the social language; if they value them or, at least, understand why they are valued; and if they believe they (will) have real access to them or, at least, (will) have access to meaningful versions of them." (Gee 2004, 282)

In mitigating some of the above concerns, rather than having learners explore gamer cultures as themselves (as private people engaging in their own private lifeworlds but on the public stage of formal education), offering the learners a 'role' that one can play within game cultures as secondary or specialist discourses (Gee 2015). As argued by Gee, the practice of moving between semiotic domains is increasingly called for and valued as social capital in a digital and globalized world (Gee 2003; also Blume 2019).

Drawing from both Gee's and Hallet's discourse perspective, the following aspects might be paid attention to when having learners take on different roles derived from gamer discourse cultures:

- ***(Inter)textual repertoires:*** Within a particular role, what does one's sphere of textuality look like? The games themselves, the blogs one reads, the conversations with friends, family, colleagues, the streaming platforms, the social media outlets and the interfaces and kinds of text that must be negotiated there. Engaging with what Hallet describes as the "*Spiel der Texte"* that might be at play in any discursive role (Hallet 2002).
- ***Genres of participation:*** How does one negotiate the social-discursive-textual sphere (i.e. semiotic domain) in which they are taking part and what textual-discursive contributions can one potentially make to this sphere? Within these spheres of potential participation, how does one affirm and/or create new meanings that contribute to cultural discourse? What affinity groups (i.e. social affiliations; Gee 2003) are available to those who make use of these spheres of participation?
- ***Constraints on participation:*** Attention to contextual factors, including the material, discursive, interpersonal conditions that one must navigate in participating in such spaces. This might include a consideration of: What are the limitations on participation within this semiotic domain? Who and what else (e.g. interfaces, algorithms, bots) is in

the room that implicates one's participation in these spaces? In classroom activity where actual participation in e.g. public online spaces is infeasible or ill advised, recognition of these constraints can help educators *simulate* the conditions inherent to these spheres of participation in classroom activity (e.g. if having leaners create a video-based game review, limiting it to the length allowed for in e.g. a TikTok video, rather than having learners post their video using an actual TikTok account).

What follows is a consideration of the (inter)textual repertoires, genres and constraints of participation that are implicated within the different roles connected to diverse gamer cultures. The roles that will be considered below include a) learners as game audiences, including as players and spectators, b) game specialist roles, such as learners as game curators, community architects and critics, and c) learners as game creators.

6.2.1. Game audiences: Learners as players and spectators

In considering game audiences as all those who play and/or spectate play and game-related media, this section is concerned with the most 'everyday practices' of participation in game cultures. 'Game-related media' can refer to a range of medial engagements, such as exposure to filmic or book adaptations of games, reporting on games (in established news media, but also through blogs, social media posts and videos), physical books on games, toys based on games, board games adapted from digital games, social media mentions (including through memes and advertisements), game streams (including *Let's Plays*), and so on. Based on this list, it is clear that a large number of people – even those who wouldn't identify as 'gamers' – can participate in everyday practices relating to game cultures. In light of this, this section finds use in Reinhardt's paradigm of "everyday technology-mediatized language learning" (Reinhardt 2022) which considers the complexities inherent in addressing technological practices in language education that fall outside of the domains of work and education (i.e. lifeworld domains, especially involving the use of social media) that invariably follow learners into the classroom. In adopting his view of effective language-oriented pedagogy for working with 'technologies of the everyday' in connection to digital game media, the following recommendations for practice will be addressed below:

- Developing an awareness of the multifariousness of gaming cultures and associated 'everyday' gameful practices;
- Attending to learner *habitus* in relation to everyday media practices and how this might be addressed through a relational, awareness-raising approach;

- Implementing pedagogic designs that prioritize learner agency, autonomy and privacy in addressing 'everyday gameful practices', including through simulation and role-play.

a) ***Developing an awareness of the multifariousness of gaming cultures and associated 'everyday' gameful practices***

A concern for the multifariousness of gaming cultures dovetails with my assertion at the beginning of this dissertation that a monolithic notion of gaming and game cultures can be unsupportive of educators looking to bring games and gameful practices into the language classroom. Those who game and spectate can participate in a wealth of different practices in both the digital and non-digital spheres to different degrees of intensity. As such, the exact constellation of gaming or gaming-adjacent practices one might engage in can vary wildly from person to person. Low-intensity gamers might not identify as gamers but still play the odd game, perhaps particularly those games that are already accessible on devices they use for other things, i.e. mobile games. High-intensity players may identify as a gamers, but even then enjoy different styles of play. Particularly secondary school gamers may have only limited access to costly game titles and may instead sink considerable time into free-to-play titles (e.g. *Fortnite*) or sport-like or sandbox-like games that can be played for an endless number of hours without reaching an end point (e.g. *FIFA*, *Minecraft*; see also Chapter 1.2. for a discussion of popular game titles according to the latest JIM-Studie). The kinds of devices one has access to can influence the kinds of games one plays – and can account for the popularity of game titles like *Fortnite* and *Among Us* which feature cross-compatible play, meaning friends who own different devices can still play together.

How one identifies as a gamer or non-gamer can also vary greatly. Learners may not see themselves as gamers but still game as a way to spend time with friends. People interested in games might not game at all and prefer to act as spectators: High-intensity spectators may be interested in watching particular games, e.g. have an interest in eSports where watching game tournaments is comparable to attending football matches. They may also be interested in following certain streamers who post videos of themselves offering commentary while playing (i.e. *Let's Plays*). Low-intensity spectators may have incidental exposure to games because, e.g. they are around when games are being played by their friends or family, or videos of such games being played are featured on their social media feeds, or they may be curious when a certain degree of buzz builds around a game, or they are interested in transmedial game properties, such as TV shows and movies that have been adapted from games (e.g. *The Last of Us, The League of Legends: Arcane, Super Mario Bros.: The Movie*). Gaming or spectating can be more or less solitary and more or less social depending on preferences, available game infrastructures and social groups. Gaming can also be more or less meaningful for learners – a passion vs. an infrequent

hobby vs. something they do not like, either because they have not found gameplay to be particularly fun in the past or because gaming is associated with things that are opposed to their own identity. On this last point, one could scrutinize the role of *commercialized* gamer cultures – or, gamer identities as they are marketed to game audiences as consumers – and how these influence whether one might want to identify or be identified as a gamer. In considering two variations on commercialized gamer culture that are especially prominent, one might compare the especially childish, primary colour-laden, cute character-filled gamer culture as promoted by e.g. Nintendo which frames gaming as a family friendly activity (making young players likely to ask for the games, and parents more likely to buy them), or the overly masculine and militaristic gaming cultural aesthetic that is often marketed to (especially) male adolescents, where, for instance, if one looks at the designs of gaming computers or gaming furniture (which even IKEA now offers), one will find designs that are typically dark, with bright neon accents, bulky, and militaristic – very much in keeping with a stereotype of gamers as existing in dark teenage man caves. Such a view of gamer culture can have negative associations – games as trivial and childish, gamers as tied to abusive online cultures (e.g. multiplayer gaming and trolling). Although these two versions of commercialized gamer culture are certainly not representative of the diversity of game players and spectators (which involves all age groups, all genders), it can account for why one who enjoys games or game-related media would not want to be *labeled* a gamer or game enthusiast.

In terms of addressing gaming cultures in the classroom, just because many gameful practices can be considered 'everyday practices' doesn't make them less complex. Groups of learners asked to brainstorm what is involved in gaming cultures might paint very different pictures to reflect the different constellations of gaming practices they have been exposed to and/or value. The different environments, devices and platforms where one engages with gameful media practices can additionally afford and constrain particular kinds of participation from game audiences (e.g. different social media platforms feature different arrangements of text and/or video and/or images; hyperlinked and sharable content; synchronous or asynchronous interactional offerings). These constraints feed back into how one's means of participation continue to shape media cultures – through clicks, views, likes, shares and buys, as well as through generating new or remixed content. Which leads to the next point:

b) Attending to learner habitus in relation to everyday media practices and how this might be addressed through a relational, awareness-raising approach

Reinhardt defines *habitus* as "a set of dispositions that mediates perception and action toward our lifeworld existing just below the surface of awareness" (Reinhardt 2022, 69).

Although learners may participate in game cultures through different means, how these different pathways to media translate into considerations such as register, interactional patterns, nuances of multimodal composition can be quite opaque for learners despite their engagement with these forms in their everyday lives. As learners can engage in unique constellations of practice in relation to game media, learners (and educators) may be additionally unaware – or unlikely to articulate – how their constellations of practice compare. These aspects could be interrogated in awareness-raising classroom activity, for instance, in genre-based instruction (e.g. Hallet 2016) or through the Knowledge Processes as articulated within Multiliteracies Pedagogy (e.g. Kalantzis et al. 2016). In doing so, attention must be paid to the fact that genres of participation in digital cultures are particularly fluid. Where approaches to, for instance, pre-digital writing have tended to treat genre-based approaches as separate from creative writing approaches, where genre-based approaches focus on imitating established generic structures closely and where creative approaches focus on innovations in making meaning (see Matz 2018), the treatment of such (post)digital authoring practices can benefit from a breakdown of these distinctions. Indeed, as Kern argues in his second principle of a Relational Pedagogy: "Language, literacy, and communication rely on both convention and invention" (see Table 21 below). Reinhardt also makes reference to Kern's relational approach to communication (as also advocated for in this dissertation; see Chapter 2.2.2.) arguing that it is supportive in building a critical awareness of everyday media practices as grounded in "interrelationships among users, audiences, intentions, and semiotic choices, rather than on those elements in isolation from one another." (Reinhardt 2022, 73). Indeed, in building an awareness of nuance as regards everyday game-related practices, Kern's heuristic questions alongside his relational pedagogical principles can be a useful tool for educators and learners in orientating themselves within varied game-related practices:

Table 21: Kern's relational pedagogical principles and attendant pedagogic goals (Kern 2015, 223)

Principles		Pedagogical goals
1. Meanings are situated and relational, not autonomous.	→	Develop learners' awareness of how reframing and recontextualization affect meaning.
2. Language, literacy, and communication rely on both convention and invention.	→	Show learners the fundamental importance of social conventions in discourse, but also how people adapt conventions, resources, and designs for their individual and collective purposes.
3. The medium matters.	→	Encourage learners to reflect on how language forms are conventionally constrained by material contexts, and how they change over time. Familiarize them with historical precedents that have helped shape the communication technologies they use. Develop their ability to analyze mediums critically for ideological or commercial underpinnings.
4. Texts and communication are always multimodal.	→	Encourage learners to reflect on how linguistic and non-linguistic elements interact in texts, as well as in face-to-face communication.
5. Language, technologies, and texts mediate between the social and the individual; between ourselves and real and imagined worlds.	→	Develop learners' awareness of this mediation and the consequences it can have for understanding. Get learners to think about how in the process of making texts they create social identities.

In working with bits of game media – whether *Let's Plays,* fan fiction, memes, game adaptations, news items, reviews, criticism and so on – a consideration of the above questions when such formats are authored in connection to game media versus these formats when related to other media (especially interesting for this dissertation, other kinds of *expressive text,* e.g. contemporary literature; graphic novels; film), can also be illuminating.

c) Implementing pedagogic designs that prioritize learner agency, autonomy and privacy in addressing 'everyday gameful practices', including through simulation and role-play

On the one hand, Reinhardt argues: "Learning activities that encourage the following of personal affinities and interests – perhaps by following trends and individuals in the language and culture of study using social media – can connect learners to the L2 in authentic and sustaining ways, leading to more active participation and autonomy." (ibid., 74). On the other hand, he warns: "Because learners have considerable agency when they use everyday technologies like social media outside of class, when those technologies are adapted for uses focused on formal learning, learners may resist and feel infringed upon." (ibid., 74). In constructing tasks that incorporate everyday medial practices, Reinhardt emphasizes that some of this problematic can

be addressed in giving learners some agency regarding "*whether* and how they do the task" (ibid., 75). This is especially important when incorporating 'everyday gameful practices' that are associated with social media in respecting the privacy of learners. Rather than setting a task that requires the use of an actual online presence (e.g. responding to posts *on* Facebook), such tasks can be run as *simulations* instead, where the medial format and interaction structures of the task (i.e. affordances and constraints) are transposed into the classroom context (e.g. formulate a response using a digital template that *resembles* a Facebook comment). I would further emphasize that certain task scenarios can create additional distance between the learners and their private everyday practices, for instance, where learners are asked to work with media that explicitly is *not* presumed to resemble their everyday practices – for example, through roleplay where learners are asked to respond to or generate content through a role that is explicitly not themselves ('create a meme of x game from the perspective of a person who only likes games like y'). In developing roles for task work that should foster *nuanced* responses to content, it can be helpful to task learners to play the role of 'experts' speaking from an informed perspective (see also Chapter 6.2.2. below) rather than from the role of a comparatively uninformed layperson (which may lead to the simulation of stereotypically 'bad' behavior that can be found online; i.e. trolling; making inflammatory statements) and/or granting them an opportunity to develop in more detail the characteristics and intentions of the role they want to respond through. When having learners respond to particular media, one can also give them a selection of media to respond to so they can negotiate their own preferences as a part of the task. A deeper consideration of the specialist roles of game culture will be considered in the following sub-chapter.

6.2.2. Game specialists: Learners as collectors and curators, as community members, leaders and architects, as commentators and critics

Even the most incidentally engaged game audiences help to shape gamer culture through clicks, views, likes, shares and buys. This is a form of *collective* shaping – many people participate on platforms *en masse* based on such platforms' calls to participation (through interfaces and interactional features). Social platforms then store and parse the data, and further shape them (e.g. through algorithms) in generating more content, more connections, more features, more entangled meanings that are fed back to their users. In contrast, people with a more deliberate and intensive interest in digital games may act more deliberately in shaping the game cultures in which they take part and, in doing so, take on more specialized roles within their sphere of participation. Such specializations may represent a hobby (a game collector, a commentator, an active participant in game communities) but can also represent full professions (curators,

archivists and preservationists, game critics and game community architects). Regardless, the expertise developed here can serve even more particular purposes and can be leveraged to solve particular problems of digital cultural discourse that specialists feel warrant their extended engagement:

- **Curators** may want to emphasize certain aspects of game culture and disseminate these – because they want to share content that they find meaningful, to reflect on this meaningfulness, and also create a path for more of such meanings to be made;
- **Preservationists and Archivists** are often concerned with the volatility of game infrastructures and want to avoid the loss of material game culture that can occur once technology and copyright systems evolve to a point where older titles can no longer be easily disseminated and played;
- **Community Leaders and Architects** want to foster community engagement and may be invested in nurturing a social culture that they think is of value for particular game audiences to participate in;
- **Game Critics** may seek and disseminate deeper meaning in what people play, how they play, how games are made, the industry conditions that give rise to games and how gameful meanings intersect with other cultural meanings and processes.

Game-interested secondary school learners are perhaps unlikely to have specialized too deeply within the above roles of game culture (and if so, then likely at the level of a hobby), but these specializations represent real secondary semiotic domains that, firstly, have a role in formulating the game cultures in which they take part and, secondly, that learners may indeed adopt as their own at some point in the future, or, thirdly, that involve competencies, practices, registers, affiliations that may be relevant to *other* semiotic domains that learners will engage in in the future.

Classroom activity that affords learners the opportunity to explore these specializations and what these specializations contribute to the culture in which they take part is well addressed within Hallet's approach of *komplexe Kompetenzaufgaben* (Hallet 2013). Within this view, learners are considered active participants in the wider discursive world beyond the walls of the classroom and are tasked with making their own contribution to these discourses and the problems attendant to them. The core task is formulated in response to a real-world problem and learners engage in varied activity to eventually take on the task, including engaging with various texts that afford the negotiation of different perspectives within the relevant discursive

sphere. What follows is a look at some of the specialized roles within game culture that have been mentioned so far and examples of problems/tasks that learners could take on in exploring these roles.

Table 22: Developing increasingly specialized roles from game cultures alongside classroom tasks

From <u>Game Collectors</u> to <u>Game Curators, Preservationists, Archivists</u>
Game Collectors: Developing playlists of games based on personal preference or as a recommendation for someone else's preferences. Requires experience with a range of game titles. E.g. a playlist of games featuring great stories; with the most interesting characters; with the most exciting mechanics for a particular play style. **Game Curators, Preservationists, Archivists:** Developing playlists from a more particular/critical perspective, e.g. based on themes surrounding game cultures (games involving migration, games featuring ecocriticism, games featuring strong female/LGBTQ+ leads) or based on themes from within game culture (games involved in the Gamergate controversy, games by Black designers, games from a particular gaming era). From these perspectives, one might move beyond playlists and also consider how games might be curated for e.g. a museum exhibition (from which perspective? For what purpose?). Learners can visit/read about exhibits that already exist and the particular challenges they have in presenting digital/game-based media. Challenges can be posed, such as considering what games are important to preserve? Why and how? What games could be curated as part of a school curriculum (because they teach something important / confront learners with important themes and ideas)? What games would you curate for e.g. aliens to show them what life is like on Earth? There is a wealth of perspectives that can be taken on from within this role.
From <u>Community Members</u> to <u>Community Leaders</u> to <u>Community Architects</u>
Game community members & leaders: Consideration of what kinds of game-based communities are out there, the purposes they serve and which communities one would want to be a part of (or not) and why. What makes a good community great and, if one were to take on a leadership role in a community, how would one foster such a community? **Game community architects:** Awareness that the platforms that host game communities were designed by somebody for particular purposes (e.g. profit; to support certain kinds of play; to share community created mods). From this perspective, learners can be confronted with a social design challenge of their own: if you were to create a new social network for gamers with a particular set of qualities (e.g. inclusive; safe; for particular communities of people; for a particular context, e.g. gaming at school) how would you design it? What kinds of social interactions would you want to foster? How would you achieve this?
From <u>Game Commentators</u> to <u>Game critics</u>
Commentator: This role involves providing a perspective or opinion on games and game cultures. From this perspective learners can express opinions from their own experience, such as E.g. What makes a good multiplayer game? What game should win the BAFTA for best writing this year? Such perspectives can be shared in brief or at length through e.g. face-to-face conversation, but also through online conversation (e.g. the comments section of a blog post on this topic).

Critic: Provide a critical appraisal about games and/or gamer culture. Perhaps greater attention to the formal formats for criticism and processes for developing arguments – e.g. news article; video essay; professional interview (e.g. on a podcast). Examples from real world game criticism can be brought in as examples. As with the curation category, perspectives may concern cultural aspects surrounding game culture (e.g. how certain themes are explored in particular games) but also from within game culture (e.g. game studios that are champions of representation in games).

These categories are not entirely rigid, feature overlap, and many of the tasks that might be derived from these roles involve digital means and themes to different degrees (e.g. in the community architect category, one could design a community that meets in person vs. a social media platform). In terms of taking on a role within a new semiotic domain, Gee further offers principles for both active and critical engagement:

"If children (or adults) are playing video games in such a way as to learn actively and critically then they are:

1. Learning to experience (see and act on) the world in a new way
2. Gaining the potential to join and collaborate with a new affinity group
3. Developing resources for future learning and problem solving in the semiotic domains to which the game is related
4. Learning how to think about semiotic domains as design spaces that engage and manipulate people in certain ways and, in turn, help create certain relationships in society among people and groups of people, some of which have important implications for social justice" (Gee 2003, 45-46)

However, as mentioned by Reinhardt and Jones, care must be taken when asking learners to critically interrogate content and/practices relating to their lifeworld domains. I argue that offering leaners to develop and 'play' within specialist roles can afford opportunities for active and critical engagement while preserving critical distance between the work and learner's private lifeworlds as learners experiment within these specialist domains.

6.2.3. Game creators: Learners as adapters, modders, designers and producers

As when engaging with any other narrative media in the language classroom, educators can adopt a creative or product-oriented approach in which learners are tasked with adapting, extending, and creating new content in connection with the texts they are engaging with. Doing so with *game* media has received little attention even in the more comprehensive treatises on DGBLL

(e.g. Reinhardt 2019, Sykes & Reinhardt 2013). This is likely due in no small part to a concern for the technical aspects that make 'game design' seem a prohibitively complex task for the language classroom. However, there are many production roles in relation to game media that do not necessarily require programing and design teams for games generally feature a range of expertise. Below are some recommendations for having learners take on specialist creator roles in relation to narrative game media:

a) Explore the breadth of potential creator roles both inside of and surrounding game design

First of all, adaptation tasks can afford learners the opportunity to take on production tasks that do not necessarily have to interface with digital means of production (e.g. Huertas-Abril & Muszyńska 2023). Such tasks can be situated in formats common to the everyday gaming practices of hobbyists – fan fiction and fan art, creating memes, adding commentary to gameplay recordings (e.g. Jones 2018). Machinima is a niche practice that involves recording gameplay videos where players act out a role within their game avatar to creating new film-based narratives (Luckman & Potanin 2010). More conventionally, adapting game narratives into e.g. film scenes could have value at a time where filmic and tv series adaptations of digital games are having a cultural moment (e.g. *Last of Us, Super Mario Bros., League of Legends; Arcane*).

In designing expansion or adaptation tasks that have learners act as game media designers, it is important to note that not everyone working on game projects is a programmer. One might play the credits for any particular game (e.g. on *YouTube*) with one's learners and talk about all the different roles that can be seen there (narrative design, character design, sound design) and which roles learners would find interesting to learn more about. There is an increasing availability of 'making of' videos on e.g. *YouTube* that can afford learners a glimpse into these varied expert roles. An example task from this view would be to have learners imagine they were to join the studio of a game they like within a particular role (e.g. narrative design). Tell them that they will be responsible for designing a DLC[111] for this game within their chosen role. Have them develop and pitch their idea. This can be done in groups, potentially with different group members taking on different design roles.

[111] DLC: "Downloadable Content" that is made available via download after a game's initial release, sometimes for free and sometimes as a to pay for expansion. Amongst other things, DLCs can include new narrative storylines and game mechanics that accompany or add to the original version of the game.

b) Immerse learners in indie game creation cultures

It has been argued throughout this dissertation that indie game titles, particularly those featuring entangled ludonarrativity, have a lot to offer the language classroom despite not being the most popular titles for young gamers in their private spheres. Indie design projects can similarly provide inspiration from the perspective of the design role in language education. Such projects can be more contained (e.g. short games, focused mechanics, smaller gameworlds) and feature individual talents more recognizably (see Juul 2019). Many indie game creators talk about and document their design processes which can be brought into the classroom to help learners prepare for their own game creation roles, as is the case for games that have previously been introduced in this dissertation, including: Pixel Hunt's *Bury me, my love* (Pixel Hunt n.d.), Momo Pixel's *Hair Nah* (Pixel n.d.), Anna Anthropy's various projects (Anthropy 2012), and Nicky Case's *Coming out simulator* (Case n.d.). Indie and amateur game creators often take part in a vibrant Jam culture, where Game Jams are game design events that resemble a Hackathon but for game design (e.g. *The Global Game Jam*). The indie gaming platform itch.io hosts an immense number of independently developed games, but also allows jammers to host and participate in a wide variety of jams, including those well suited to beginners without a large degree of technical expertise (see *itch.io*). *The Global Game Jam*, the largest jam that takes place yearly, has also developed an offshoot program for young game designers, called Global Game Jam Next, which includes access to resources such as explainer videos that detail aspects of the game design process (see GGJ Next n.d.).

c) If having learners design a functioning digital game, explore accessible tools and keep projects contained

There are plenty of accessible tools available for learners to take a larger leap and create their own functioning digital games. If emphasizing *narrative* gaming, editors for designing interactive fiction, such as *Inklewriter* or *Twine*, are especially accessible – i.e. they are free to use and browser based (see also Stannard 2018). As will be seen in Table 23 below, the story design process for game narratives can be really different from other kinds of narrative media and it can be important to keep projects small and – from experience – as focused on *non-digital* design phases as possible:

Table 23: Piloted perspectives from practice II: Adapting a film scene into a short IF game

Context: What follows is a lesson sequence that I have piloted with both older school pupils (11th grade and up) and trainee teachers over several semesters
Step 1: Choose one scene from a movie to adapt: Since one is writing a branching narrative, one can easily bite off more than one can chew by trying to adapt a whole narrative.[112] **Step 2:** Get the transcript from the scene. Highlight important moments where characters could have made a different choice and/or said a different thing. Choose 2 to 3 of these moments as the basis for your branching, alternate story paths. **Step 3:** Plot out the narrative, including these branching, alternate paths before working with *Inklewriter* (e.g. using post-it notes on a poster) and create a decision tree for each pivotal moment. **Step 4:** Upon loading *Inklewriter*, start by re-creating the original scene in a linear fashion using the editor. Then begin adding your branching narrative paths. You can continue to branch off from these original branches, but it is recommended to only go 1-2 levels deeper. **Bonus Step:** Include procedural narrative designs: *Inklewriter* can incorporate simple conditional structures. For example, IF the character make a particular choice earlier in the narrative (e.g. picks us a knife) then specific narrative options can be made available even much later on in the story (e.g. if you picked up the knife, you may be offered the choice to use it to stab someone later in the story). For those beginning create such narratives, I challenge them to include only ONE such moment in their story as it can be a challenge to write with this narrative affordance in mind. If this is to be included in the task, this should ideally be plotted in Step 3 **Step 5:** Have learners play each other's stories and give feedback: Are the different paths coherent? Why/why not? What changes could be made? Give learners a chance to edit their narratives and to then once again play through each other's final products. **Step 6:** Reflection. How is this way of writing a story different from more linear approaches? What was difficult? What worked well? What would you do differently next time? If you were to task your own learners in school to create such narratives, what scaffolding/materials/procedure would be supportive in each stage of the design process?

6.3. Summary of Part II

Chapter 3 of the dissertation introduces a "Ludonarative Framework for Narrative Digital Games in TEFL" which was assembled through a reading of the 'tension' between narrative and gameplay through the methodological frames of 'narrative games as task environment', 'as expressive text' and 'as cultural discourse'. The core insight of this framework is that the quality of ludonarrative intra-action in a gametext has implications for how meaning may be negotiated between player and gameworld through player action and, further, that this negotiation of meaning has methodological implications across the three methodological frames proposed. Where narrative and player action are disentangleable, there is likely to be strong resonance

[112] For example, *80 Days* features a 750 000 word script for a game that can be played in 2 hours (Inkle Studios 2015). Compare this to a 30 000 word screenplay that would be typical of a 2-hour movie.

between the 'game as task environment' and 'game as expressive text' frames (i.e. entangled ludonarrativity), whereas in games where narrative is additively realized – rather than through play-based mechanics; e.g. as watchable film clips – the 'task environment' of the game and how this relates to TEFL-relevant learning objectives may have a more variable relationship to a treatment of the same game as an 'expressive text' (i.e. complementary ludonarrativity). This relationship is teased out in more detail in the three following chapters, each of which handles one of the three aforementioned methodological frames. Principles that can be derived from these chapters are as follows:

a) Narrative digital games as task environments **(Chapter 4)**

- Goal-oriented activity that players undertake in a game can be evaluated using the notion of task in FL education.
- This evaluation can attend to classic features of tasks (situated in a functional communicative understanding of language learning as this is currently enshrined in Bavarian curricula) but can also take into account a literacies-informed perspective, particularly where the semiotic domain of the game involves players in sustained negotiation of meaning beyond (but also including) the use of the linguistic mode and target language.
- A literacies-informed perspective to TBL attends to the play-as-discourse practices that are afforded by the semiotic domain of the gameworld, particularly where such practices involve active and goal-oriented negotiation of meaning between player and gameworld. How meaning is negotiated through player action additionally relates to the amount of iterative action and novel action involved in gameplay. Iterative action may or may not equate to language practice. Novel action can be negotiated as a ludonarrative gap between the player and gameworld or between players who play the same gameworld (a negotiation of which may extend into the task environment of the classroom).
- The task environment of the game *intra-acts* with the task environments of the classroom and of the wider world. Designs for games as task environments can leverage these entanglements. This may involve treating the game themes and narratives as content to be negotiated in the interactional context of the classroom (i.e. in the vein of literary and cultural learning), but can also involve recruiting the roles of gamer culture into the classroom, or projecting the gameplay roles from the gameworld into the classroom.

b) Narrative digital games as expressive texts **(Chapter 5)**

- Digital games can be regarded as an expressive medium, in the same vein as e.g. visual arts, literature, as well as film and other performative arts.
- From this view, the approaches and methodologies of TEFL for engaging with *expressive* media in particular (e.g. literary or filmic learning; see Lütge 2018) can be extended to digital games. Principles that are central to this view: fostering opportunities for evocative as well as interpretive responses to games, the negotiation of these evocative and interpretive responses in the interactional context of the classroom, and attending to how expressive meanings are in dialogue with larger cultural themes, ideologies and practices.
- Familiarity with expressive conventions specific to digital games can facilitate teachers and learners in articulating the aesthetic experience of play and in extending their individual responses to games as expressive texts within the interactional context of the classroom. Of particular note: features of a ludic aesthetics (the player-character; the gameworld as material encounters; player engagement and flow; and choice and configurations); fostering ludic narrative discourse competence (including evocative, enacted, embedded and emergent aspects as offered by Jenkins 2010, but also an awareness of procedural narrative structures, the performative and improvisational nature of play, and ideological entanglements involved in game narratives).

c) Narrative digital games as cultural discourse **(Chapter 6)**

- Digital games can be regarded as cultural content and are entangled in cultural discourses.
- In approaching games as cultural discourse, they can be leveraged as target culture (where themes, stories, environments of a game are leveraged as a representation of a particular culture), as intercultural encounters (where players are cast in roles that doubles as or facilitates encounters with the cultural 'other'), and/or as a space for expression, performance and negotiation of notions of identity, belonging and ideology.
- Negotiating games as cultural content can be challenging as games are part of a larger digital world that challenges notions of culture as it is sometimes understood within cultural learning.
- Engaging with the cultural discourses that games are entangled in can be facilitated by learners participating in these discourses through the various roles of gamer culture: e.g. as game audiences, as game specialists, as game creators.

- Engaging with cultural discourse in TEFL has various purposes: to develop knowledge about cultural entities, identities and processes; to foster this knowledge alongside the attitudes and skills that will allow learners to navigate cultural encounters more effectively (Byram 1997); to become attenuated to one's own cultural becoming in the world and to navigate this purposefully, critically and/or ethically (Kramsch 2014; Pennycook 2018). Another perspective is the social capital inherent to learners being able to navigate between semiotic domains, of gameworlds or otherwise (Blume 2019).

PART III

EXTENDING THE LUDONARRATIVE FRAMEWORK INTO FORMAL SECONDARY-SCHOOL CONTEXTS

7. Inroads for teaching with ludonarratives in the formal classroom at the nexus of culture, text and task

The evaluative framework as it has been proposed up until now has been constructed from specialist knowledge of both Game Studies and TEFL discourses with reference to a broad collection of digital gametexts. Of course, not all of this specialist discourse is immediately accessible for educators who are in the initial stages of engaging with game media in their classrooms. What follows is, in part, a reformulation of what has been described in detail earlier in this dissertation. Firstly, I will offer additional support for the performance of a diffractive evaluation of gametexts through heuristic questions and principles as relates to approaching games as task environments, expressive texts and cultural discourse. Secondly, I offer insights relevant to the curation of ludonarrative titles for the language classroom.

7.1. Evaluating gameworlds: Towards a diffractive reading of ludonarratives as culture, text and task

In the previous section of this dissertation, I began by looking at a core tension in Game Studies – games as rules and as stories – and moved from that point increasingly into methodological discourses specific to TEFL – games as task environments, expressive texts and cultural discourse. For educators who may have different degrees of experience with narrative digital games – and who may struggle to pinpoint a game's place on the ludonarrative continuum (Chapter 3) – perhaps it is more appropriate to evaluate narrative games in reverse and to start from the more familiar, methodological frames in performing a diffractive reading of individual gametexts. In the vein of Richard Kern and his Relational Pedagogy (Kern 2015), presented here are the three methodological frames rephrased as a set of evaluative, heuristic questions. This will be followed by an overview of game-specific principles attached to approaching narrative games at the crux of culture, text and task and as derived from Chapters 4 – 6 of this dissertation.

7.1.1. Heuristic questions and principles for a diffractive evaluation of narrative games as task environments, expressive texts and cultural discourse

The table below includes heuristic questions for engaging with narrative game media within the three methodological frames of games as task environments, as expressive texts and as cultural discourse. This will be followed by principles for engaging with game media from within these frames as derived from the discussion from Part II of this dissertation.

Table 24: Piloted perspectives from practice III: Heuristic questions for trainee teachers in their engagements with ludonarratives

Context: The heuristic questions that follow have been piloted within different game-based seminars with trainee teachers over several semesters		
Narrative Games as Task Environments	**Narrative Games as Expressive Texts**	**Narrative Games as Cultural Discourse**
To determine how "task-like" various player activities are in a game, consider the following questions as adapted from Willis & Willis (2007) and Ellis (2018): **Is there a primary focus on meaning?** And to what degree is meaning negotiated through the L2 and classically-defined communicative competencies and to what degree through other modalities and play-as-discourse practices? **What range of goals and outcomes are offered within the 'possibility space' of the gameworld?** In considering these varied game goals, where is success judged in terms of outcome? Where is completion a priority? **Is there some kind of gap?** Between player and game? Between different players of the same game (i.e. an experience gap)? And what proportion of play time is likely to be leveraged in meeting these gaps? **To what degree is *discoursing* (i.e. player action) in the semiotic domain of the game relevant to *discoursing* in the real world and with the target language?**	**In relation to game media in general:** In what ways can games be considered an expressive medium (i.e. at the level of art or literature?) In what ways are games similar to other expressive media? What expressive devices or conventions do games typically 'borrow' from other expressive media? What expressive devices or conventions are unique to games? How could the techniques and priorities (e.g. segmented readings; evocative readings) for working with other expressive media carry over into working with game media? **In relation to a particular game:** What evocative responses have you had in connection to this game? How are these responses similar or different to responses you've had with other media? What expressive devices are leveraged by this particular game? What impact do these devices and themes have on your individual experience of the game? What themes or larger discourses are expressively attended to within the game?	**Culture as experienced in the game:** Does the game involve particular target cultures? Does the game represent or engage the learner in intercultural encounters? Does the game engage with negotiations of identity, belonging and/or ideology? **Participation in game cultures:** In their engagements with gametexts or game discourse, what roles can learners be cast as?: as game audiences (player/spectator), as game specialists (curator, critic, community architect), as game creators (and within which design roles)? To what degree could a game and/or game role invite players to participate in broader "communities of practice" or "affinity groups" (Gee 2003)? What intertextual repertoires and genres of communication and creation are attendant to participation in these roles and within these groups? Could these repertoires and genres be drawn on in formulating extension tasks in working with a particular game?

In evaluating player action as a negotiation of meaning afforded by the task environment of the game, how much of the action is iterative vs. novel? Does iterative action involve language practice? Does novel action involve bridging (ludonarrative) gaps (either in the gameworld or as could be extended into the task environment of the classroom)?	How could individual aesthetic and thematic responses to a game such as this be elucidated, negotiated and extended into the interactional context of the EFL classroom? In particular: What activities will support learners in having and articulating their own evocative and interpretive responses to the game media? What does a ludic narrative discourse look like within this particular game and how is it co-constituted through the engagement of its players? Including: narrative as evoked, embedded, enacted and emergent to the gameworld (Jenkins 2004) and as realized through the bridging of ludonarrative gaps.	**Alignment with curricula and agendas of learning:** How do the themes of the game align with themes or content areas that are a priority in a particular curriculum (in terms of communicative genres; in terms of cultural learning; in terms of interdisciplinary content areas, e.g. digital citizenship)? What conversations are happening "around" the game that are relevant to genre and content priorities in a particular curriculum?

As indicated in the table above, all of the frames implicate aspects that are recognizable within conventional practice in TEFL and others that are specific to game media and that perhaps benefit from a literacies-informed perspectives in language education. For example, in regarding games as task environments, games may feature conventional communicative gaps that are likely to be bridged within the target language (i.e. information gaps, reasoning gaps, opinion gaps) and could be evaluated as conventional tasks. However, in games that feature a negotiation of meaning as action where the presence of the target language is questionable or disentangleable from other modalities, TBLL might be informed by a literacies-orientation whereby ludonarrative gaps are either extended into the task environment of the classroom (Chapter 4.3.) and/or negotiated through the expressive text (Chapter 5) and cultural discourse (Chapter 6) frames that are suited to leveraging such meanings in further classroom activity. In regarding games as expressive texts, games might share significant conventions with other more established expressive media and be addressed under similar objectives and using similar techniques (Chapter 2.3.1. and Chapter 5), however, games also have an expressive language of their own, including that which may be treated under a ludic aesthetics and as ludic narrative discourse (Chapter 5.2. and 5.3.). In regarding games as cultural discourse, games speak to wider cultural discourses in much the way other media do (Chapter 6.1.) but digital game cultures feature specific roles which connect to specific textual repertoires and genres of participation that might also be leveraged in classroom practice (Chapter 6.2.).

7.1.2. Play cycles for engaging games as culture, text and task

In posing the heuristic questions above, educators may then have learners approach actual gameplay through a combination of play cycles that are supportive of different purposes for play in the language classroom (see Table 25):

Table 25: Play cycles for narrative games as cultural discourse, expressive texts and task environments

	Type of Play Cycle	Purposes / Procedures
General	**Orientating Play Cycle**	Play for the purpose of figuring out how to control and participate in a game at the most basic level. Useful where learners might have different levels of expertise in the conventions of digital play. Perhaps the less experienced players take direct control of a game and the more experienced players offer support from the side.
<— Cultural Discourse —— Task Environment —— Expressive Text —>	**Evocative Play Cycle**	Play for the purpose of securing evocative responses to a gametext. - **Pre:** Helping the learner 'get into character', providing supports to help learners get through the most off-putting aspects of the 'resemiotization' process. - **While**: Learners attend to their experiences of play, including narrative experience. - **Post**: Sharing and processing of initial evocative responses. Learners can be supported to consider: 'What experiences are you bringing into the game that are affecting your own responses?' 'How is the game constructed that it made you feel a certain way?'
	Interpretive Play Cycle	Revisiting a game for the purpose of testing out and further developing interpretive hypotheses (regarding textual themes, the form and impacts of ludic/narrative devices, participation in (ludo)narrative discourse). - **Pre:** An evocative play cycle. Introduction to relevant ludo/narrative devices. - **While:** e.g. Game journaling; Co-playing with targeted discussion points. - **Post:** Exchange of responses in the classroom domain.
	Task-Based Play Cycle	Play for the purpose of exploiting communicative/textual gaps that feature between player(s) and gameworld - **Pre:** Setting up play arrangements to maximize gap filling in the task environment of the classroom (e.g. solo play vs. group play). Emphasizing goals for play that most relate to the gaps in question. - **While:** Learners attend to the game as task environment. Depending on the game difficulty, supports can be made use of (e.g. game guides; getting support from other players in the room) - **Post:** Present results / Report on gaps filled.
	Task-Enhanced Play Cycle	Play for the purpose of fulfilling tasks associated with a game-external player role (player as game specialist; player as game creator; player as film maker, etc). For instance, playing the game as a media creator intending to e.g. adapt the game into a film; creating a DLC; posting a video-based game review; creating a gameplay guide; curating a museum exhibition, etc. - **Pre:** Establish learner role and tasks/discourses associated with that role. Establish what needs to be collected from play (screenshots, notes) in order to fulfill role-specific tasks. - **While:** e.g. Focused game journaling; extracting game excerpts - **Post:** Fulfilling and presenting on the game-external task.
	Multi-perspectivist Play Cycle	A kind of interpretive play cycle. Play for the purpose of interrogating individual perspectives and ideologies as these are expressed through gameworld and its mechanics. - **Pre/Post:** Engagement with other texts that offer alternate perspectives on a shared theme. Sharing perspectives. - **While:** Consider: What is one's lived experience in participating in this gameworld (and how does this contribute to *an* interpretation of real world lived experiences and attendant ideologies)

7.1.3. Pedagogic implications derived from a *diffractive* reading of game media through the lenses of culture, text and task

In relation to the above points, there are a few additional principles that are specific to a *diffractive* reading of game media through these three methodological frames – in other worlds, principles specific to digital games as they sit at the crux of practices relating to task work, expressive texts and cultural discourse – that I would additionally like to assert here:

a) The blurring of methodological and sub-disciplinary boundaries

It was argued at the beginning of Part II that the three methodological frames presented here are themselves a materialization of TEFL theory and sub-disciplinary trajectories within the German field of *Englischdidaktik*: *Games as task environments* is congruent with TBLL and many of the concerns of CLT and, in terms of subdisciplines of *Englischdidaktik*, both of these are well represented within the sphere of *Sprachdidaktik; Games as expressive text* aligns well with literary learning, aesthetic learning and the sub-disciplines of *Literaturdidaktik*, as well as *Mediendidaktik; Games as cultural discourse* aligns with ICC, cultural learning more broadly, discourse perspectives in TEFL and with *Kulturdidaktik*. In considering the sub-disciplines mentioned above, these can be quite siloed off from one another in traditional TEFL research and practice. For example, within the American collegiate context, there is discussion of a so-called 'bifurcation problem' with cultural/literature courses being distinct from communicative/language focused courses (Paesani et al. §). Meanwhile, in the German context, theorists have described how subdisciplines such as *Literaturdidaktik* were sidelined and then re-defined within the communicative language movement (Surkamp 2019§). As seen in Chapter 3, games with entangled ludonarrativity (and some games with complementary ludonarrativity and high quality ludoexpression) present a challenge to these siloed approaches and disciplines of TEFL. In entangled ludonarratives, one can not separate the game as a narrative and expressive text from the game as a task environment and, as such, such games benefit from a certain degree of methodological hybridity. One theoretical strand that ties together, for example, TBLL and literary learning is a literacies-informed perspective to meaning making in TEFL. Another strand that is more developed in current TEFL research are discourse persepctives (see Gee; Hallet §).

b) An action-orientation at the crux of treating games as culture, text and task

In taking a step back from the three methodological frames as developed in this dissertation, one commonality that is worth mentioning is their collective resonance with an action-orientation in TEFL. This is a characteristic of the frames themselves and reflects the

prominence of an action-orientation in contemporary TEFL discourses, but is also resonant with a characterization of games as 'possibility spaces' that host the negotiation of meaning as action. I would draw special attention to an action-orientation as relates to ecological theories of TEFL, such as espoused by Leo Van Lier.[113] Within his view of an action-orientation, greater attention is paid to the processes (rather than products) of learning as these are emergently realized through classroom activity. He identifies certain approaches as especially resonant with action-based learning, particularly where learner agency is emphasized and prioritized, such as in project-based learning, task-based learning and content-based learning – and in the case of the latter, a prioritization of aesthetic and cultural meanings are seen to be congruent with content-based learning. As asserted by Van Lier:

> "task-based learning focuses on the nature and design of tasks and the learners' strategies and activities in completing them; content-based learning puts the focus on subject matter and content and the ways in which this content can be presented to and internalised by the learner. So, in many ways, task-based and content-based learning complement each other: tasks need content to make them relevant and meaningful, and content needs tasks to engage the learners actively." (Van Lier 2007, 48-49).

Similarly, approaching a game through one methodological frame does not preclude the use of another – and in fact, there will be shared zones of activity, perhaps most prominently in games featuring entangled ludonarrativity (see Chapter 3.3.2.) or that feature strong ludonarrative resonance (see Chapter 3.3.1.). In riffing off of the sociomaterial thrust of this dissertation[114], Van Lier's notion of agency might be re-framed as the freedom to act meaningfully in relation to the 'possibility space' proffered by different kinds of classroom activity – including gameful activity. The three methodological frames of this dissertation are intersecting pathways for negotiating play-based meaning as action – whether within the semiotic domain of the gameworld or as this extends into the semiotic domain of the classroom.

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[113] Van Lier's perspective has some commonalities with an action-orientation as espoused in the CEFR and its authors (in particular Piccardo & North 2019). But these takes on an action-orientation should not be treated as inherently aligned.

[114] An ecological perspective as offered by Van Lier has already been identified in this dissertation as resonant with some aspects of a sociomaterial view – the main differences to reassert here are, firstly, an imperative to interrogate taken for granted conceptual constructs inherent to particular disciplines and, secondly, the co-constitutedness of learner agencies with other material and non-material factors. To revisit Barad's approach, agencies are co-productions between the human and the wider material-discursive phenomena in which they take part. The implications of this will be teased out further in the following Chapter in relation to formal education's confrontation with digital culture.

b) Attention to learner roles and negotiation of meaning within the interplay of culture, text and task:

In attending to an action-orientation, I argue that many problems of working with game media might be resolvable through clear articulation of the *roles* learners are asked to take on in relation to game media. Clarity of roles organizes learner activity in relation to game media in coherent ways and such roles also implicate concrete learning objectives. To reiterate, possible learner-player roles as these were introduced in Chapter 4.3. of this dissertation:

- **The learner-player as (target) language learner** – which largely attends to game activity (in the game and surrounding the game) that affords the practice of aspects of communicative competence (particularly in the target language);
- **The learner-player as participant in game culture specific roles** – as game audiences, specialists and/or creators (see Chapter 6.2.);
- **The learner-player as player-character** – which involves attending to the role the learner takes on within a gameworld and extending this into the semiotic domain and task environment of the classroom.

While the role of 'learner-player as (target) language learner' is – often implicitly – prominent in DGBLL research, this is a role that proffers learners few roadmaps for attending to game meanings outside of target language activities – and as established frequently in this dissertation, meanings are performatively negotiated in the 'possibility space' of gameworlds through action – including action that may 'unreliably' rely on a particular 'target' language. In contrast, roles such as 'the player-learner as player-character' as extended into the task environment of the classroom (which extends 'game-specific' negotiations of meanings but now within the 'target language-oriented' communicative space of the classroom; see Chapter 4.3.) and/or game culture specific roles (such as game audiences, specialists and creators; see Chapter 6.2.) provide a wealth of opportunities for communicative action while still honoring the game as expressive and culturally precious media on the whole. Critically, game meanings that are not 'target language specific' are not discarded out of hand as is likely to occur when the 'learner-player as (target) language learner' role and its affinity with a relatively closed, functional notion of communicative competence (see also Chapter 2.2.1.) is the sole role offered to learners in approaching game media in the classroom.

Again, the roles described above do not 'sit' within one methodological frame. For example, in attending to the 'player-character' role, I might participate in communicative action, explore expressive meanings and enact cultural discourses. In attending to the crux of meaning that can be exploited in evaluating and designing for games as culture, text and task, particular

attention can be paid, firstly, to all game action that occurs in the 'possibility space' of a gameworld as meaningful and as negotiable through multiple frames (see Table 26 as initially presented in Chapter 3.3.3. of this dissertation) and, secondly, the particular relevance of ludonarrative gaps that sit at the crux of games as text and task (see Table 27 as initially presented in Chapter 4.2.3.).

Table 26: A ludonarrative budget for evaluating player action in narrative gametexts

Additive Narrativity	**Entangled ludonarrativity** ← → **Complementary ludonarrativity**		
Narrative Progression without Player Action	Player Action that Contributes to Narrative Progression	Player Action that Complements or is Adjacent to Narrative Progression (see 'Ludonarrative Resonance')	
Watching/reading the story	Doing the story	Being in character	
No action needed: After triggering the scene, no further action needed on the part of the player as the narrative sequence unfolds.	Actions less iterative: always leads to negotiation of new meanings (as tied to novel events that are part of the overarching story)	Actions more likely to be iterative: Intensive negotiation of meaning features especially in the first iterations as players find orientation in the game, but actions become routine or automatized over time. Can contribute to a sense of narrative immersion, even when the narrative itself is not progressing.	
Reading / Watching Narrative Events: Interesting to consider here *how much* narrative progression occurs here versus in the previous column and *how seamless* the transition is between action in the previous columns and these narrative events	*Performing Narrative Events:* Direct participation in narrative progression and ludonarrative discourse through play. Can involve making meaningful narrative choices and/or having to piece together narrative information from diverse game elements.	*Character Routines:* Being in and engaging with the larger gameworld. Such engagements can contribute new meaning (e.g. fleshing out the gameworld and game lore) but do not equate to narrative progression.	*Player Automatizations:* Practicing and getting better at recurring game challenges to the point that they can be met easily (and tactically, when needed).

Table 27: Ludonarrative gaps as negotiations of meaning in digital games

	Within the Game	**Around the Game**
Information Gaps	**Familiarization with the semiotic domain of the game** –Confronting the unknown through exploration. Discovering how to unlock and interact with the mechanics of the game. Finding orientation within the possibility space of this particular gameworld and learning how to act in it; i.e. *discoursing* within the game's semiotic domain; Gee 2015 ***(Orientation Gap).***	**Sharing different play experiences and providing play support** – What happened in your game versus in mine? ***(Experience Gap),*** How can I/we solve this puzzle? How can I/we move forward? Resolving this collaboratively, but also looking for solutions elsewhere (e.g. online forums).
Reasoning Gaps	**Solving game puzzles** –particularly convenient are those that involve the target	**Solving game puzzles through co-play** – including those that do not include linguistic signs *per se;*

	language or that are tied to the narrative situation of the game; ***Figuring out how to navigate, unlock, participate in the game's narrative** – Can be quite variable depending on the game. For instance: *A Normal Lost Phone:* Searching through the phone for clues in order to unlock more content by e.g. finding a password for unlocking internet access in the phone's archive of text messages; *Heaven's Vault* and *Blackbar*: Decoding the language puzzles that are tied to story beats; *Obra Dinn:* Deducing what happened to the ship's occupants through engaging with audio clips and 3D-tableaus of the game's scrambled narrative moments.	***Figuring out how to navigate, unlock, participate in the narrative together** – Playing the game in groups and reasoning through these same narrative puzzles together. Players can be encouraged to hypothesize together outside of gameplay before trying out their hypotheses in the game.
Opinion Gaps	***Configuring a narrative** – especially in games that involve making meaningful choices and role playing. E.g. by creating a character with a particular set of abilities or by choosing between narrative options (exercising "projective identity" à la Gee 2003) (e.g. *Disco Elysium*, *Stanley's Parable).*	***Comparing what choices made, why such choices were made, what makes these choices meaningful** –Furthermore, evaluating the consequences of choices and what this indicates regarding the worldview of the game. Sharing interpretations of ludic and narrative themes. ***(Experience Gap + Ludic Narrative Competence, see Chapter 5.2.3.).***

7.2. Curating gameworlds: A consideration of ludonarrative genres between culture, text and task

There is much that can lead educators astray in their search for 'good games'. Firstly, there are more games than ever on the market, particularly with online storefronts such as Steam and itch.io facilitating independent and amateur game creators to share their content (see Hayes 2019). Secondly, there are a large number of fantastic games that are simply inaccessible to the classroom: For example, many great games are stuck behind game subscription services (e.g. Apple Arcade or Netflix Games) or behind private consumer-based storefronts (including Steam, GOG, itch.io, Epic Games, as well as most commercial VR storefronts) or that are exclusively available through single-purpose gaming consoles (e.g. Nintendo Switch, Playstation, Xbox). Thirdly, as has been argued in Chapters 1.1.2. and 3.3.3., when attempting to find good games according to their popular game genre, such categories do not provide a comprehensive and reliable guide for the kinds of player action (and the negotiation of meaning as action) that a game will offer. Additionally, these popular genre categories offer little information regarding the overall 'quality' of any particular game and have little to do with high quality titles that feature genre-blending and bending. This is particularly true of many of the independent games that feature prominently in this dissertation which "use styles and design principles that set them

apart from mainstream games" (Juul 2019, 13). As I have written elsewhere: "Whereas the overarching goal of many mainstream games is for the player to become skilled enough within the constraints of the game to beat the game (to 'get good' at defeating enemies, solving puzzles, or at generally navigating a game world), independent games focused on presenting novel perspectives or a diversity of experiences may leverage game mechanics for deliberately expressive purposes – or that invite a deeper reading of the text and aim to be more than just entertaining, educational or commercially viable." (Stannard 2022, 102). It is these kinds of games that arguably have a lot to offer to the language classroom – in terms of both the unique combinations of competence such games afford the practice of, as well as in their offering of new, complex meanings that make them especially interesting to explore as expressive and cultural texts.

One valid approach for curating game titles is in attending to the thematic perspectives that are explorable through collections of games and other media – in the vein of what Werner Delanoy refers to as "textual ensembles" (see Delanoy 2018, 152). In considering the games that have featured prominently in this dissertation and/or that are otherwise recommended within my own evaluation of these gametexts, Table 28 offers just one recommendation of game titles as organized by theme. Any one of these lists could be complimented by other kinds of media as well.

Table 28: Thematic collections of gametexts that are featured in this dissertation

Thematic Collections	**Game Titles**
Meta Games, or games that comments on games: Games that thematize the negotiation of games as a medium and their semiotic conventions. *The Stanley Parable, There is no game, Getting Over It with Bennet Fody.*	*The Stanley Parable* *There is no Game* *Getting Over It with Bennet Fody.* *The Visit*
(Digital) dystopias and lost worlds: Technocritical and ecocritical themes are especially common within digital game dystopias.	*Broken Age* *Heaven's Vault* *NORCO* *Blackbar* *Paper's Please* *Orwell* *Disco Elysium* *I was a teenage exocolonist*
Alternate Histories & Post-Colonial Perspectives	*80 Days* *The Return of the Obra Dinn* *Venba* *Disco Elysium* *Seasons: A Letter to the Future*
LGBTQ+ Narratives	*Coming Out Simulator*

	A Normal Lost Phone *Gone Home* *Life is Strange*
Migration Narratives	*Venba* *Bury me, my love* *Paper's, Please*
Meditations on the profound and on the mundane: - On Death - On Bureaucracy - On Belonging	*Spiritfarer; A Mortician's Tale; That Dragon, Cancer* *Voter Suppression Trail; Papers, Please* *Venba; A Normal Lost Phone; Hair Nah; What Remains of Edith Finch; Gone Home*

This thematic approach is a valuable one, but will not be taken up further here. What follows is rather a consideration of ludonarrative genres (including some popular game genres as well as additional genres that I am proposing here) as curated in line with the discussions central to this dissertation. It is hoped that these might be supportive of educators who are perhaps less familiar with a broad range of game media in finding orientation with narrative game media. Many of these games qualify as entangled ludonarratives, although short, complementary ludonarratives with strong themes, expressive devices and ludonarratives resonance are also considered here. A balance has been struck between accessible games that are easy to access via browser or through education-friendly digital storefronts, as well as exceptional games which could conceivably find their way to such storefronts someday. Many of these games have been introduced earlier in this dissertation and will be referenced accordingly.

7.2.1. Embodiable Gameworlds: Graphic Adventures and Simulators

This subchapter considers games – whether 2D or 3D – in which one inhabits a playable character who moves in the world similar to how we move in our own – as a body traversing through space. In such embodiable gameworlds, one typically embodies their character either through a first person perspective (the view of the camera as though it were looking through the player-character's eyes[115]) or a third person perspective (where one sees their avatar moving

[115] A first-person view is typical in a few 2D genres, particularly in Visual Novel style games (e.g. *Doki, Doki, Literature Club*), and more typical in 3D genres like Shooters and Walking Simulators (e.g. *The Stanley Parable*).

through the game space[116]). Within such games, semiotic conventions to do with perspective are especially recruited from media such as graphic fiction as well as performative media, ranging from the act of playing with doll houses (e.g. isometric games) to animation and live action film productions.

The embodiable game narratives featured here are either strong in *entangled* ludonarrativity or *complementary* ludonarrativity but with relatively contained gameworlds, strong themes and an excess of ludonarrative resonance (see Chapter 3.3.). Three ludonarrative genres will be addressed here: graphic adventures, walking simulators and slice-of-life simulators.

a) Graphic adventures

This is an established and broad game genre that puts special attention to story, exploration and puzzling (problem solving) and which both visually and narratively draws from conventions common to graphic fiction, animation and film. In the 90's, these games largely fell under the category of point-and-click adventure, which was appropriate to the PCs that ran such games. In the internet and mobile device era, a new wave of graphic adventures have been released, particularly by independent developers. Within this new wave, there are many hybrid graphic adventures that draw mechanics from other genres, such as RPGs (e.g. *Disco Elysium*), interactive fiction (e.g. *Heaven's Vault*) and visual novel games / social simulators (e.g. *I was a teenage exocolonist*), but – for the purposes of this dissertation at least – their strong focus on story, exploration and puzzling within an embodiable graphic interface qualifies them to be considered here. Notably as well with the mobile device era is the increasing number of re-releases (often referred to as 'ports' of a game), game adaptations and series expansions on earlier point-and-click adventure games and franchises (e.g. *Monkey Island, Broken Sword, Sam and Max*) – including many games that had previously been dubbed 'abandonware'.[117] This development is unsurprising since finger tapping on, for example, an iPad is functionally not so different from clicking with a mouse on a desktop computer with monitor – making such games relatively

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[116] A third-person perspective can still be quite variable between 2D, simulated 3D and real 3D games: For example in *Monkey Island*, a classic point-and-click adventure title where one's character (Guybrush Threepwood) is viewed through 3rd person perspective as he walks through a 2D gameworld – a sense of perspective and distance is maintained using similar techniques used in animation; or in a so-called isometric game, such as *Baldur's Gate 2*, which features a 3rd person view that is similar to looking down obliquely at a dollhouse; *Horizon Zero Dawn,* an adventure title which offers a 3rd person view typical in 3D adventure-like games where the camera follows over the shoulder of the avatar pictured on the screen.

[117] Abandonware: A piece of software that is no longer supported, recognized or protected under copyright law in relation to its developer.

practical and affordable to port.[118] Notable within this genre is the broad range of titles that appeal to all age levels – with some games catering to the youngest of gamers (for example, the recently released *Bluey: the Video Game* which is targeted at pre-schoolers). Other titles – such as *I have no mouth and I must scream* (a post-apocalyptic game adapted from Harlan Ellison's original short story from 1967) or *NORCO* (an ecocritical, dystopic view of a Louisiana-based town in the future) – critically distinguish themselves from many of the well-known but decidedly cartoony and light-hearted titles (such as *Return to Monkey Island*) in their exploration of mature and ideologically confronting themes. Other popular sub-genres that can be considered under this umbrella are e.g. escape room games and visual novel games.

Other notable features of this genre include:

- They are relatively easy to control, translate well onto tablets and are generally accompanied by straightforward walkthroughs that are available online;
- Due to their focus on story, exploration and problem solving – gameplay typically involves interacting with the environment, speaking with NPCs and solving puzzles. Many of the interactions with the gameworld and NPC dialogues feature communicative action as this is normally prized in the TEFL classroom – but communicative action can be sidelined by games that require e.g. considerable walking back and forth through game environments or that feature extensive puzzles that are not related to language use or that are not deeply embedded into the narrative.[119] Since such games typically do not rely on motoric or tactical combat mechanics, they are largely bereft of combat-based iterative action that can be difficult to accommodate in extended classroom play.
- Due to their prevalence on tablets, games falling in this genre are especially accessible within the tablet-equipped classroom.[120]

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[118] Compare this to games that require multiple button pushes mapped to different kinds of action (e.g. using a game controller or keyboard) – this is functionally more difficult to port onto an iPad which relies on tapping and gestures. Many attempts (e.g. adding virtual buttons and joysticks onto the screen interface) are clunky and not as pleasant to play as when played with a controller or keyboard.

[119] While such games tend to feature puzzles or problem solving in order to move forward, depending on the kinds of problem solving and the relationship of puzzles to the narrative, in terms of ludonarrativity such puzzling mechanics can be more or less complementary to or entangled with the narrative. The more entangled the puzzles, the more potential meaning making value in co-playing such games in the classroom. Otherwise, one might address the evaluative considerations of complementary ludonarratives (where mechanics are evaluated separately from the narrative for their relevance to the classroom; see Chapter 3.3.1.)

[120] Multiple people can control the device, few periphery devices are needed, the device can be used in the regular classroom environment using common social arrangements (as individuals, in groups, as a class where the game is projected onto a screen.

Especially recommended titles within this genre:

Broken Age: While many of the titles introduced in this dissertation are perhaps more appropriate for upper secondary school, this is one title that is relatively accessible for early- to mid- secondary school. The game focuses on two characters – a boy being raised alone within an AI-controlled spaceship since the loss of his parents and a girl who stands up against the traditions of her village and escapes being sacrificed to a monster that appears every 14 years to consume the village's maidens. The characters' worlds seem very different at first glance but become increasingly connected throughout the game's narrative. The title is additionally appealing due to its charming animation style and its featuring of the voice talents of well-known actors, including Elijah Wood, Jack Black and Wil Wheaton. Some of the deficits of the game that have appeared in its review – e.g. the puzzles that have been described as too easy – may in fact be a boon for its use in the classroom.

There is no game: How do you play a game that insists it is not a game? Within this title, the game itself is an NPC and your insistence to play it despite its assertations against its game-like nature features as the central conflict. The game fights your attempts to play it through a number of strategies: it obscures its own mechanics (the start screen – which declares in large font "There is no game" – offers no instruction, but like a digital escape room can be 'solved' by the player by taking apart the bolts that hold up the sign), it offers up predatory game mechanics (at one point, it tries to trap you in a slow-moving 'freemium'-style game), it forces you into the background (in the form of a point-in-click adventure in which you control a game from 'behind the scenes' as though you are behind the set of a stage play (i.e. in the vein of *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or *Noises Off*). The game features significant negotiation of meaning as you repeatedly have to learn '*what kind of game am I playing now?'* Many of the mechanics are ultimately those of digital escape rooms, point-and-click adventures, and classic adventures (in the vein of the original *Legend of Zelda*), but are also referential of other game genres (the freemium game). By persisting to play the reluctant game, you eventually learn what the game-as-NPC is hiding from.

The Return of the Obra Dinn: This game is set in 1807 and you play as an insurance adjuster for the East India Company. A ship, the Obra Dinn, that was presumed lost at sea has floated home but with all passanger and crew listed in the ship's manifest either dead or missing. Your character receives a pocket-watch that allows you to look back in time at various catastrophic moments that make up the game's narrative. Each time the pocket-watch is used over human remains, one hears an audio clip over a black screen with subtitles of a catastrophic

moment followed by a 3D-tableaux of the event that you can walk through. In looking through the scenes that feature in each of the game's scrambled Acts (or chapters), you have to reason through what happened to each passenger and crew member – and thus, to the ship on the whole – through abductive reasoning. Like *Her Story*, this is a game best played with a notepad on hand and lends itself well to collective reasoning in a group.

Heaven's Vault: A graphic adventure with a language twist. You play an architect, Aliya Elasra, from a futuristic interplanetary civilization and have been tasked with finding your missing colleague, Janniqi Renba. This task affords your character the opportunity to explore the nebula and the civilization that inhabit (or used to inhabit) it. In doing so you come across artefacts inscripted in an ancient hieroglyphic language. To dig into the meanings of these artefacts, your task is to decode the inscriptions – which requires hypothesizing and testing out your hypotheses as to how the language works – its grammar, its syntax, its lexis – and applying this experience to future encounters with the language. In addition to its puzzle mechanic (which is filled with opportunities for metalinguistic reflection), one navigates game locations, converses with NPCs (with variable outcomes) and relatively freely explores the hidden nooks and crannies that make up the fictional nebula.

Other notable titles: *NORCO, Kentucky Route Zero, Life is Strange, I was a teenage exocolonist.*

b) Walking Simulators

This is a popular, if at times controversial, digital game genre (see Clark 2017). Typically, Walking Simulators feature a first-person perspective for navigating a 3D environment – a perspective similar to that used in Shooters and Horror games, but without the stealth or combat mechanics. Indeed, Walking Simulators are defined by the mechanics they *lack*. They involve exploring a gameworld but without the combat or puzzling mechanics of similar looking games. They play extensively with spatial narrative features, such as described by Jenkins, in particular evocative, embedded and enacted spatial narrative features (see also Chapter 5.3.3.). To reiterate, evocative narrative refers to how game environments resonate with prior narrative experiences – for example, in ***Gone Home*** one explores an abandoned house with a storm raging in the background. This is evocative of the horror genre, which arguably creates more tension for the player if they anticipate other tropes of the horror genre might appear in the game – such as jump scares (which never happen, but the possibility of it is palpable). Embedded narrative involves deriving actual story events from elements littered in the gameworld that one can engage with at one's leisure. The more extensive one's explorations in a game world like *Gone Home*, the more story details are encountered. Jenkin's notion of enacted narrative also features and is often seamlessly connected (even overlapping) with one's explorations of the game

environment in the form of voice overs that trigger when one interacts with certain objects or enters certain areas.

It is contested how game-like Walking Simulators are – and indeed, the term was originally used quite pejoratively, although fans of the genre have since reclaimed it (Clark 2017). Whether it qualifies as a game largely comes down to whether one experiences it as a game – such as in the example of *Gone Home,* if one becomes involved enough in the suspense of the atmosphere and engaged in the narrative opportunities afforded through exploration, it is by players buying into the *possibility* of game-like action that gives Walking Simulators a game-like character, even when these actions are not realized. In another example, in the Walking Simulator, ***What Remains of Edith Finch****,* you play a character who is returning to a family home that has housed many family members who have died in unfortunate and tragic ways. Each story uses different control mechanics (i.e. how one moves in the world) and this constant renegotiation of mechanics can feel game-like – one is continuously having to exert effort in finding orientation in the gameworld – even though there is no way to *lose* the game and it runs largely 'on a track'.

A final example that I would like to mention is ***The Stanley Parable*** which I find especially interesting as a game that offers opportunities to reflect on games as an expressive medium**.** In the game you play Stanley and, as explained by the voiceover of the game's narrator, you are an ordinary worker of a large corporation who up until now has been happy typing commands into a computer as prompted by an unseen authority. One day, the prompts stop. As the player-character, you rise from your desk to find yourself in an abandoned workplace. As you move through the workplace, the narrator narrates everything you are seeing. Eventually, you reach a room with two doors and the narrator says "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left." At this point as the player-character, you have a choice: Do you follow the narrator, or do you exercise your agency and see what other paths have been scripted for you? Every time you stray too far from the narrated 'path', the narrator resets the game, at times offering you additional support to follow the narrator 'properly' – for example, upon one reset, a literal yellow line is painted on the floor which the narrator explains is the 'plot line' to better support you in not departing from the acceptable path. If you are relentless is avoiding the set path, the narrator experiences an existential crisis. Ultimately, whatever pathways one pursues, the game acts as a commentary on the nature of choice and agency in digital games.

Other notable titles: *Firewatch; Everybody's Gone to the Rapture; Virginia; That Dragon, Cancer.*

c) Slice-of-life simulators

What I am designating as slice-of-life simulators are games that often share game features from the previous two categories, but often additionally features a (typically iterative) mechanic or mini-game that simulates some kind of everyday experience or event. These mechanics – however mundane – are often meditations on profound experiences. For example, in considering titles that were first introduced in Chapter 5.1.3.:

- ***Hair Nah*** is an arcade game by Momo Pixel created as "a response to the perverse action of touching a Black woman's hair without permission. The micro-aggression of assumed authority and ownership of black bodies." (Pixel n.d., n.p.). In the game, the player-character sits in an airplane and is made to whack at the hands of white women that fly out from the corners of the screen to touch your Black avatar's hair. The game is one agonizing moment in time experienced again and again. The game's core mechanic is simple, frustrating and metaphorically captures the repeated sting of a micro-aggression occurring on a loop. While such sensorimotoric iterative action in games is often seen as counterproductive for the purposes of language learning, here it serves as an expressive device that can be negotiated in the task environment of the classroom that surrounds the gameworld.
- The *New York Times's* ***The Voter Suppression Trail*** similarly features a mundane series of events and actions related to voting. The game attempts to capture the frustration inherent to a voting process that is stacked against certain demographics of voters.
- ***Mortician's Tale*****,** which tasks you with running a funeral home which involves a string of mundane activities, including reading emails, engaging in dialogue with family members of the deceased and preparing corpses for funeral viewings using non-challenging sensorimotoric activities (e.g. wiping the body down with a sponge, filling it with embalming fluid). Through repetitive mechanics the game offers an opportunity to reflect on the mundane and profound moments involved in death as an everyday event.

Normally, the arcade-like and repetitive sensorimotoric mechanics that feature heavily in the above games would be considered a liability for classroom play in TEFL – as such iterative action does not qualify as language practice, nor do these games include much in the way of ludonarrative gaps that need to be filled in order to *progress* in the game. In other words, such games would fare poorly when evaluated as a conventional 'task environment'. However, the practice of these actions is less about 'getting good' and more about providing commentary on particular themes and cultural experiences – which could be meaningfully engaged with when

regarding such games as 'expressive texts' and as 'cultural discourse' within the extended task environment of the classroom. Additional titles to consider within this category include:

- ***Venba:*** This is a game that is half visual novel and half cooking simulator. It follows the story of a south Indian family that has emigrated to Canada. At meaningful family moments, the titular character, Venba, prepares food from her homeland – which has different meaning for her than her Canadian-born son.
- ***Paper's please:*** As described in Chapter 2.3.2., you play an immigration official for a fictional cold war-era, soviet-like nation and spend much of the game scanning immigration documents to determine who can enter the country and who must be turned away. Every day, the player is given a list of rules to follow (Only people from x country with y type of visa may enter) and the player is then on the clock to correctly scrutinize the greatest number of (generally) procedurally generated documents as possible within a game day or risk having their pay docked (without enough income, the player then has to choose between e.g. feeding their family or heating the family home). This game arguably qualifies somewhat as a textual gameworld (which will be considered in the following sub-chapter in more detail) as much of the game time involves the player iteratively interacting with documents, however it does feature conversations with NPCs that you encounter through the narrow frame of your immigration booth. As discussed in Chapter 2.3.2, the game artfully juxtaposes the relentless yet mundane mechanic of scanning immigration documents against choice-based narrative encounters with NPCs that have an impact on the narrative outcomes of the gameworld. This juxtaposition of iterative and novel player action offers an exploration of the challenges inherent to exercising agency in the face of dehumanizing conditions.
- ***Seasons: A Letter to the Future*:** This game could be considered a Walking Simulator, but includes additional mechanics that relate to the player-characters role as an archivist of their world which is on the brink of an epochal shift. In visiting the gameworld's varied locations, you are able to take pictures, take sound recordings, interview NPCs and then design your impressions of these interactions in a scrapbook which must be filled to progress in the game. Each location and page of the scrapbook is a slice-of-life exploration of an age that is reaching its end.

7.2.2. Textual Gameworlds and Interface Fictions

For the purposes of this dissertation, ludonarratives featuring 'textual play' are games where a negotiation of meaning between game and player is conducted largely through a negotiation of various textual forms. Since the player does not move through a gameworld with an avatar as a body in 2D or 3D space, perspective is more variable in textual gameworlds and relates to the kind of media being depicted (in contrast to the previous sub-chapter on embodiable gameworlds where perspective conventions are typically drawn from performative media, such as film, animation, theatre or doll house play). For example, 80's-style text adventures draw from the conventions of both prose and spoken dialogue, whereas the game narration typically uses the second person 'you' and detailed prose-like description ("You awaken in the woods. You see a cabin to the north.") and the player responds in truncated, conversational first-person voice (e.g. using commands such as "Go north"). What I am calling 'interface fictions' – or games that take place through a device interface, like a computer desktop or smartphone, such as *Bury me, my love, Her Story* or *A Normal Lost Phone* – often feature a film-like first person perspective (in which the camera is your implied avatar's eyes) but the camera does not move through space and instead offers a stable view of a screen (rather in the way of a screencast). Since these games can mix and match both pre-digital and digital textual conventions, perspective, how the avatar is pictured or not pictured, and navigation from text-to-text is extremely dependent on the individual game. Of the games that have been highlighted in this dissertation so far, games that are primarily based on textual play include many of those that were previously introduced as 'readerly' games in Chapter 2.3.1., including:

- ***80 Days**:* The bulk of the game involves players negotiating a choice-based narrative as depicted through prose (in the vein of the textual genre featured in Joyce's original *Around the World in 80 Days*) and through dialogues with NPCs;
- ***Blackbar:*** An epistolary narrative in which players read and decode censored letters sent by their friend who is working for an authoritarian regime;
- ***Device 6:*** An escape room in which players have to work through a prose-based representation of the space they need to escape, rather than the more literal visual representation that is standard of escape room games.

In considering evocative narrative elements as described by Jenkins (Jenkins 2010; see also Chapter 5.2.3.), whereas in embodiable narratives evocation relies on representations of physical settings, in textual gameworlds evocative aspects are derived from textual forms and textual genres. The 'implied' world that surrounds such texts is often unpictured or abstractly depicted (e.g. in *Blackbar,* where we only see letters and surrounding world is depicted solely through its

sparse description in the letters) or viewed through the window of other textual media (e.g. in an interface fiction like *Normal Lost Phone* which takes place through a phone interface, the surrounding world is either described in text messages or pictured in the phone's photo reel).

The appeal of these games for the language classroom is quite apparent in that the negotiation of traditional textual genres – prose, dialogue, letters, text messages – clearly affords attention to the functional communicative competencies as currently articulated in state (i.e. *LehrplanPLUS*), national (i.e. the KMK *Bildungsstandards*) and supranational (i.e. CEFR) curricula and curricular frameworks. As such, these titles often fit within a traditional notion of TBLL input-based tasks: the learner has to read, watch or listen to something and then perform an appropriate action in response to achieve the objective of moving favourably through the game narrative.

A sub-category of this genre – but particularly exciting in terms of its thematic engagement with *digital* culture in particular – are what I refer to as 'interface fictions'. As introduced briefly above, in these games textual play occurs through representations of digital interfaces as the means and manner through which negotiation of meaning, identity, relationships, culture, and conflict occurs. Rather than an avatar wandering through a virtual world in a way that mimics the way we move through our world with our physical bodies, these games depict the world as experienced and embodied through screens and its various collections of texts and interface-mediated interactions. One example that has been leveraged often in this dissertation is *Her Story* (see Chapter 2.3.2 and Chapter 4.3.) where the entirety of the game is conducted through the player's engagement with the desktop of an old police computer from the 90's. If the player moves the database window which hosts the bulk of the story, they can further interact with the desktop and can mine it for further insight into the themes and narrative conceits of the game – for example, if one looks in the trash bin, one finds that it contains a small mini-game of *reversi*, which could be interpreted as commenting on the 'dual nature' of the woman featured in the police interview database.

As a sub-genre of textual play, interface fictions also conveniently include both language-heavy and otherwise multimodal textual genres – e.g. text messages, audio messages, film clips – that are of special significance within digital spaces – i.e. computer desktops, databases, browsers and so on. Traversing through these different textual forms is significant in how this engagement depicts the challenges of negotiating identity and relationships in contemporary medial environments. Significantly, ludonarratives featuring textual play, including interface fictions, often share the stylistic feature of the invisible player-character whereby players rarely get to see themselves and have to rely on their engagement with the textual world to determine

who they are and what their values are, which affords an interesting exploration of 'projective identity' (Gee 2003; see also Chapter 6.1.2.). This artfully depicts the screen-mediated management of ones' persona that is typical of *being* in the digital sphere. As will also be taken up in Chapter 8., interface fictions explore human identities and (cultural/ideological/social) affiliations as embodied through digitality – the ways in which the negotiation one's actions, memory and belonging becomes disentangleable from the indecipherable black box of digital code.

Other games that fall into this category of Interface Fiction that have already been introduced in this dissertation include:

- ***Bury me, my love*** (see also Chapter 5.1.1. and 6.1.2.): in which you control the smartphone of Majd, a Syrian man who is texting with his wife, Nour, while she journeys to seek asylum in Europe;
- ***Fake it to make it*** (see also Chapter 5.1.4.): in which you are tasked with creating a financially successful news blog, but where doing so means compromising journalistic integrity in favour of pushing sensationalist 'fake news';
- ***Her Story*** (see also Chapters 2.3.2. and 4.3.): in which you have access to a police database featuring interviews with one woman. You must navigate the database to piece together the story of the woman being interviewed.

Additional examples include the following:

- ***A Normal Lost Phone:*** You start the game and are confronted with the interface of a mobile phone. You can look through the photos, the text messages and settings, but find that you are locked out of the apps that require an internet connection and/or a password. By attending closely to the details in the text messages and photos, you can gradually puzzle out the WIFI codes and passcodes to various apps, unlocking more and more of the phone owner's life as it is encapsulated in their device. At the end of the game, you learn that the owner has discarded their old phone – an artefact of an old, mismatched identity – in favour of a new one and a new life;
- ***Orwell:*** You play someone hired by a government agency to spy on perceived threats to the state by hacking into their personal computers and communications. At the end of the game, you can choose to follow along with the government's plans or to work against them;
- ***Redshirt:*** *'Redshirt'* makes reference to the original Star Trek series in which anonymous security officers, who wore red shirts, would frequently die throughout the series. In this

> game you play a 'redshirt' negotiating his position on a spaceship through the use of the ship's social media platform, 'Spacebook'.

On a final note: It is common for textual gameworlds to be incapsulated in larger embodiable gameworlds – e.g. a game which features a menu in the form of a smartphone, like *NeoCab*. A game like *Paper's please* is a borderline case – a 2D embodiable gameworld is pictured (if limited to the view from behind a security booth) and face-to-face interactions with NPCs take place, but the bulk of the game action features the perusal and manipulation of texts (passports, formal briefs, etc.). The Visual Novel genre of games is another borderline case in that they feature comics-like images and dialogues – where comics or manga are a textual form that involves images representing an embodiable space. Again, the categories in this chapter are not meant to be a definitive typology of ludonarrative media, but are rather meant to facilitate a TEFL-appropriate exploration of relevant gametexts.

8. Cyborg pedagogies: Negotiating a sociomaterial paradigm and ludonarrative media within the digital transformation of formal language education

The notion of 'cyborg' in cyborg pedagogies conjures Donna Harraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*: A keystone work in feminist materialism, it is concerned with how gender and sex is embodied and both materially and discursively constructed and enacted in the world – rather than gender as a subjective notion that is primarily negotiated at the lofty level of discourse. Notably, Barad's *agential realism* – which has anchored the sociomaterial stance of this dissertation (see Chapter 1.2.) – was formulated partially in conversation with Haraway's post-humanist leanings.[121] For the purposes of this dissertation, the notion of 'cyborg' draws attention to the way engagements with the digital are also embodied, enacted and co-constituted. Within this view, the digital is not just a way of *doing* things – i.e. the digital as a mediating entity –, but a way of *being* in the world. In conjuring the cyborg as a metaphor, attention is less drawn to the co-existence of person and machine – or the fact that both people and machines are factors in the classroom – and more on the iterative negotiation of boundaries and potentialities for action within those boundaries when the distinction between what is human and what is non-human is contestable and perhaps unresolvable.[122] This notion that there are facets of digital culture that are not be 'resolvable' in education on its own terms is uncomfortable – it challenges tried and tested routines of formal education related to the articulation of agendas for learning, the evaluation of content and processes for learning, as well as the ways in which the roles of educators and other educational actors are conceptualized and reinforced. In picking up from Chapter 1.1.'s discussion of the promise and problem of digital games in formal language education, the more disruptive aspects of ludonarratives as classroom media is argued to be one of these 'unresolvable' facets of digital culture that is nonetheless valuable for the very fact that such games speak to our cyborg condition in a 'post-digital' cultural landscape – a claim that will be further unpicked in the following sub-chapters.

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[121] Barad's *agenital realism* largely derived through their own diffractive reading of the works of theorist such as, notably, Donna Harraway, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault and Niels Bohr (Barad 2006).

[122] Never more evident than now with the explosion of AI since the release of ChatGPT. In engaging with generative AI, outputs are not disentanglable from user prompts and yet feature highly opaque algorithms. This 'black box of code' has been used in this dissertation in relation to digital games as well, although digital games are under more authorial control by their designers (but again, since games are 'possibility spaces', game designers do not have absolute control; see Chapter 2.1.1.).

8.1. Disruptive media beyond mediation: Considerations for TEFL policy and pedagogy

The notion that media and technologies *mediate* learning, interaction, communication has been engrained in the discourses of TEFL and CALL for a long time – at the very least since Sociocultural Theory in the vein of Vygotzky has been taken up in these fields (e.g. Lantolf & Thorne 2006). In coming to terms with various takes on the notion of 'mediation', Richard Kern prefers to see 'mediation' as something that is 'in the middle' of entities, rather than as something that 'divides'. He states that whatever stands 'in the middle' of communicating entities – whether this refers to the language used when two interlocuters interact face-to-face or cultural technologies such as pen, paper, computer, or smartphone that allow for additional communicative arrangements in time and space – it is "not a clear conduit, but a dynamic ecology of complex human and technological relationships and interactions, which has the potential to transform both the process and the product of communication." (Kern 2015, 56). Significantly, Barad disprefers the notion of 'mediation' entirely, arguing that routine discursive 'cuts' typically used to distinguish between material-discursive entities – e.g. mediating from non-mediating entities – often equates to a re-inscription of "traditional empiricist assumptions concerning the transparency of knowledge practices and the givenness of the world" (Barad 2015, 244). In transposing Barad's argument into a consideration of communication, for Barad, the smallest measurable unit of communicative factors would not be 'interlocutors' and 'mediating cultural technologies', but rather communicative 'phenomena' as whole performative events that are constituted through the intra-action and entanglement of human and non-human material-discursive entities (Barad 2015, 151).[123] This is in contrast to the notion of technological mediation as it has frequently been taken up in the field of CALL where, although complex relationships between technology and various classroom considerations are certainly acknowledged, technology is still inherently treated as conceptually divisible from these factors (e.g. Hubbard 2023). The strain of this latter view is arguably beginning to show in certain (especially comparative) empirical orientations to CALL as is, for example, articulated by Carol Chappelle: "Today the most vexing issue facing researchers wishing to compare technology-

[123] "The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated." (Barad 2007, 151-152)

mediated learning and traditional classrooms is that traditional classrooms typically include technology-mediated learning." (Chapelle 2019, 582). On the one hand, this might be taken as an indication that we have arrived in the period of what Stephen Bax referred to as integrative CALL (Bax 2003). As Bax has claimed:

> "CALL will reach this state when computers (probably very different in shape and size from their current manifestations) are used every day by language students and teachers as an integral part of every lesson, like a pen or a book. **Teachers and students will use them without fear or inhibition, and equally without an exaggerated respect for what they can do. They will not be the centre of any lesson, but they will play a part in almost all. They will be completely integrated into all other aspects of classroom life, alongside coursebooks, teachers and notepads. They will go almost unnoticed.**
>
> Most importantly, CALL will be normalised when computers are treated as always secondary to learning itself, when the needs of learners will be carefully analysed first of all, and then the computer used to serve those needs." (Bax 2003, 23-24; emphasis mine).

It is true that the ubiquitousness of digital technologies and practices is certainly at play in the lives of learners and educators within the German educational context that underpins this dissertation – but in the process of technologies becoming increasingly 'everyday' (Reinhardt 2022) the 'possibility space' of digital involvement only seems to be broadening and diversifying[124] and hasn't resulted in the ease of use foreseen by Bax. One might take this to mean that the digital transformation process simply isn't 'done' yet, but increasingly, there is a notion that the digital future was never going to become as 'tidy' and 'reliable' as hypothesized. If the digital is a way of *being* (i.e. *culturally* entangled in the everyday) and not just a way of *doing* (i.e. something that *mediates*), it is intrinsically entangled in cultural processes that are also neither neat or tidy – and indeed, very much resembles the transcultural realities and practices sketched out in Chapters 6.1.3. and 6.2. of this dissertation. Within aesthetic fields, this condition has begun to be diagnosed as 'post-digitality' – a social state and/or aesthetic sensibility where the boundaries of the digital and non-digital are irreversibly blurred. As described by Berry & Dieter:

> "the postdigital recognizes the revival of 'old' media formats like cassette tapes or analogue

[124] "Social media present us with countless opportunities to connect with new people in different circles, and yet most people turn to these tools to connect with those whom they already know. In so doing, we collectively reinforce pervasive structural patterns. Your sense of what people do with social media is highly dependent on what you consume, how you consume it, and why you're there in the first place. The world you live in online looks different from the world I live in. And it looks different from the world that an average teen lives in or the world Rihanna lives in. What you experience through social media may be technically similar to what other people experience, but the cultural dynamics differ tremendously. Our worlds are different, even if the interface looks the same." (boyd 2016, 49; see also Lütge et al. 2021, 242)

> synthesizers, and more generally maps out 'the messy state of media, arts and design and their digitalization' […] Crucially, this also involves working through implementations of the computal in a regular state of constant upheaval. In other words, this is a condition in which digital disruption is not transcended as such, but becomes routine or business as usual." (Berry & Dieter 2015, 5-6)

The notion that digital disruption is now a cultural norm rather than a transitory condition flies in the face of what much of digital educational policy and pedagogy has attempted to achieve where – in response to the digital turn – actors at all levels of the educational establishment have worked towards getting this disruption under control. In considering the literature on the digital in education in the past three decades, the language that has become engrained makes this clear: throughout the early 2000s and onwards, the anxiety inherent in the notion of educators as 'digital immigrants' confronting rooms full of so-called 'digital natives' (Evans & Robertson 2019); the effort spent in articulating stable sets of digital competences (EU 2017a; EU 2017b), or in delineating literacy after literacy (visual literacy, search literacy, game literacy, VR literacy, prompt literacy) in response to shifts in the medial landscape. But, perhaps we are not entirely in control; And we are not entirely on the same page. It is important to note that there are approaches in education that are accommodating of this disruption – i.e. the 'multi' in Multiliteracies Pedagogy (NLG 1997) and Kern's Relational Pedagogy (Kern 2015) where he asserts that we can not prepare for every situation and rather need to develop skillsets and routines of *relationality* to confront novel situations in education. Conversely, there are approaches in education that seek to control the situation – often by narrowing engagement with the digital to what *can* be controlled – effectively limiting the role of technology to *mediating* the known. In moving from a consideration of pedagogy to a consideration of educational policy, educational policy as well has demonstrated an affinity toward articulating 'stable' sets of competencies and tools that can be implemented at scale (see KMK 2017; KMK 2021; EU 2017a; EU 2017b). Significantly, there are stirrings of a view more in line with post-digitality – as is apparent in the latest KMK digital strategy guide which makes reference to Stalder's *Kultur der Digitalität* (Stalder 2018, n.p.). Stalder indicates his position's "approximation" with the notion of post-digitality[125], particularly in the sense of a breakdown of distinctions between digital and

125 In formulating his largely post-structural perspective of digital culture, Stalder states: "Culture will be conceived throughout as something heterogeneous and hybrid. It draws from many sources; it is motivated by the widest possible variety of desires, intentions, and compulsions; and it mobilizes whatever resources might be necessary for the constitution of meaning. This emphasis on the materiality of culture is also reflected in the concept of the digital. Media are relational technologies, which means that they facilitate certain types of connection between humans and objects. "Digital" thus denotes the set of relations that, on the infrastructural basis of digital networks, is realized today in the production, use, and transformation of material and immaterial goods, and in the

non-digital practices and infrastructures and coming to terms with the idea that rather than being in the middle of a digital transformation process that will 'resolve' at some point, we have rather 'arrived' in a cultural condition that will require continuous re-negotiation and caretaking. Stalder is sympathetic of the challenge facing formal institutions, such as education. As he describes:

> "More and more people have been participating in cultural processes; larger and larger dimensions of existence have become battlegrounds for cultural disputes; and social activity has been intertwined with increasingly complex technologies, without which it would hardly be possible to conceive of these processes, let alone achieve them. The number of competing cultural projects, works, reference points, and reference systems has been growing rapidly. **This, in turn, has caused an escalating crisis for the established forms and institutions of culture, which are poorly equipped to deal with such an inundation of new claims to meaning**." (Stalder 2018, n.p., emphasis mine)

The value of the sociomaterial perspective taken up in this dissertation is that it offers theoretical structures and methodological toolkits for attending to these "new claims to meaning". It can engage with conceptual tensions that have emerged from (post-digital) cultural upheaval with curiosity, rather than as something to fix or tidy. It leans into material-discursive ambiguities, disruptive (medial) phenomena and black boxes of practice. In other words, it is a theoretical frame that is responsive to our need for a cyborg pedagogy – one that can handle pedagogical phenomenon where separating the learner from the algorithm becomes increasingly difficult.[126]

8.2. Ludonarratives and the learner-player as cyborg

What role do ludonarrative media play within this discussion? As argued throughout this dissertation, the value of digital games for language education is not only rooted in their popularity, their motivational qualities, or the way they afford communicative action in an

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constitution and coordination of personal and collective activity. In this regard, the focus is less on the dominance of a certain class of technological artifacts - the computer, for instance - and even less on distinguishing between "digital" and "analog," "material" and "immaterial." Even in the digital condition, the analog has not gone away. Rather, it has been reevaluated and even partially upgraded. The immaterial, moreover, is never entirely without materiality. […] "Digital" thus refers to historically new possibilities for constituting and connecting various human and non-human actors, which is not limited to digital media but rather appears everywhere as a relational paradigm that alters the realm of possibility for numerous materials and actors. My understanding of the digital thus approximates the concept of the "post-digital,"" (Stalder 2018, n.p.)

[126] A notion that is arguably becoming all the more critical within the AI renaissance triggered with Open AI's public release of ChatGPT in 2022.

established sense – although all of these are possible positive factors – but rather that digital games are a cultural form that participates in these "new claims to meaning" that Stalder argues are so challenging for established institutions to engage with (Stalder 2018, n.p.). Indeed, as 'disruptive media' games are an aesthetic realization of many of the dynamics at play in a post-digital cultural condition; in other words, they expressively speak to our cyborg natures. This is explorable through ludonarrative media in some of the following ways:

a) Exploring entangled agencies within the 'black box' of digital technology

If I search something in Google and navigate through the results, how much of this production of seeking and finding new meanings is me and my contributions to the search (the search terms, selecting the results I will give attention to) and how much of it is attributable to the algorithm (which generates, curates and provides the interface through which answers are made accessible to me)? A similar question can be asked of one's engagement with any of the AI-based tools which are increasingly penetrating educational spaces (e.g. *DeepL, ChatGPT*). This is a question that is aesthetically explorable in gameworlds and within a ludic narrative discourse: To what degree do my choices matter? What are the constraints on my actions – the ones that are 'tactile' and obvious (i.e. the game makes this information immediately available to my senses through the multimodal interfaces of the gameworld), the ones that I presume, and the ones I might never be made aware of? For example, one can play *Bury me, my love* and never be made aware of the fact that certain narrative pathways are out of reach in relation to variables and conditions that respond to earlier game choices (e.g. the quality of relationship between Majd and Nour, which is based on having had more positive interactions than bad ones earlier in the narrative). Even in games that do not feature narrative choices,this is relevant – such as in an action game where certain actions (e.g. dodging a hit from an enemy) results in 'invincibility frames' – brief moments following an action where your player-character can not be hurt. In especially frenetic action games, these so-called 'i-frames' augment your chances of keeping your character alive for longer. Unless one engages more deeply with the medium and is familiar with the notion of i-frames, players can avidly play such games and not know how these bits of invisible code are indivisible from one's ability to participate in the game. As such, digital games can afford thematic engagement with the dilemma: to what degree are my actions my own and to what degree are they shared by the machine? As argued by Berry & Dieter in their consideration of post-digitality, this enmeshing of algorithm and action is not always a utopic relationship:

> "as ubiquitous computational infrastructures radiate data, they encourage tacit modes of knowing and the **iteration of habit** – and thus also create *agnōsis,* or 'not knowing' through a

> form of agnotology. By 'agnotology' we are referring to **the way in which computation facilitates a systemic production and maintenance of ignorance**. **Computational technologies direct us towards a passive trust in widely delegated, yet obfuscated actions** (see Berry 2012). **This tendency towards automated and accelerated modes of action complicates and may undermine structures of reflection and critique.** One consequence is a twisting and turning of computational logics into other contexts against attempts to orient and 'get a grip' on computational things. In this way, notions such as postdigital are also performed and mediatized in rather novel ways, and can be taken as a complementary unfolding of aesthetization of computational infrastructures." (Berry & Dieter 2015, 5; emphasis mine).

Certain games encourage a reflection on this enmeshing of action and the machine, such as in the example of *The Stanley Parable* – an arguably postdigital parable where the player is pitted against the voice-over narrator and can explore what happens when one *stops* generating inputs based on faceless prompts from a machine? In *I was a teenage exocolonist*, the game is meant to be played again and again and, with each playthrough, the player is increasingly aware of and able to manipulate all the variables that count within a playthrough (e.g. 'by when do I need at least 10 points in 'bravery' in order to choose the most favourable action?'). Each additional playthrough is an invitation to 'game the game' and gain mastery over elements that were completely out of one's view and control in the first playthrough. Other games do not invite this sort of reflection automatically – again, one could do a run through most IF games and have no notion of how detailed the procedural playscape of the narrative is. Classroom activity that draws attention to ludonarrative gaps – e.g. between different players' playthroughs – can make an exploration of these directing architectures that operate in the black box of the game's code more open for reflection. I would draw attention here again to what Ian Bogost has described as a "procedural rhetoric", or "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (Bogost 2007). Games expressively contribute to one's engagements with a procedural rhetoric – a rhetoric that it is also valuable to be attuned to within the non-expressive digital spaces in which learners and educators spend much of their time.

b) Meditations on action – the mundane and the profound

Perhaps one of the most controversial claims of this dissertation is that, especially in a 'good' game, all forms of play-based action are meaningful for the language classroom – even the most iterative, mundane, target language avoiding, and communication confounding action. Action is how one 'speaks' in a gameworld and there is value in paying attention to how this speech is realized differently across different gameworlds as semiotic domains and what claims to meaning this speech has. This is in contrast to much research in DGBLL that has been laser focused on only those game actions and game-related action that most resembles

communication between human interlocutors – whether this is interaction between gamers in multiplayer games or in online gamer spaces; or participating in game dialogues that are recognizably mediated through a 'target language'. In *Hair Nah*, whacking away the hands of white people transgressing the bodily autonomy of one's Black avatar has meaning. Iteratively swinging a sword in an adventure game also has meaning – it is a part of being 'in character' in a particular gameworld. Of course, these meanings are *made* most useful to the language classroom when a consideration of them is drawn into the interactional context of the classroom – as with any aesthetic device that might be scrutinized in any other piece of expressive media (see Surkamp & Nünning 2020, 25; see also Chapter 5.2.). Paying attention to the most mundane of actions in digital spaces is additionally relevant to navigating a digital culture. Although much discussion on digital meaning making in curricula sees participation as contingent on content creation through digital means, it is important to highlight that participation in a digital culture involves more than just content creation (creating text, images, videos), but also clicks, taps, views, purchases and shares. These actions – however mundane seeming – are also co-constitutive of the cultural spheres in which we take part.

c) *Interfaces as identity, perception and cultural action*:

Digital games can afford an exploration of the ways in which interfaces act as more than just neutral tools for mediating human action, but are rather co-constitutive of meaning making practices, identity formation and cultural participation and belonging. All digital games feature some arrangement of interfaces – this includes whatever appears on a game's screen, including features such as e.g. the HUD, the game journal, the game map, character configurations screens; but also the game's controller as a kind of interface for a player's action in the gameworld –and these interfaces are functionally similar to the interfaces of 'everyday digitality' as engaged in through smartphones, computers, websites and other digital forms. As explored in Chapter 7.2.2., *interface fictions* in particular are a ludonarrative genre that draw attention to how interfaces participate in meaning making, including as relates to the augmentation and shaping of one's own memory, identity, affiliations and actions in the world. Interfaces also influence how identity and affiliations are curated: what I keep and what I bother to delete; what is kept private and what is shared (where and with whom); and the friction or relative ease by which these curatorial acts can be performed. For example, in a *Normal Lost Phone*, it is apparent how a smartphone offers more than just a neutral record of our lives: When the game's trans protagonist chooses to fully, socially transition into their authentic selves, the discarded phone symbolizes the shedding of their former socially-recognized self. The content on the phone gains new significance upon

understanding the owner's journey, highlighting how interfaces are imbued with meaning through our interactions—a composite of messages, media, and user history. These interfaces sculpt our connections to people, places, and ourselves, enabling a curated memory and co-configuration of one's social/cultural affiliations. *A Normal Lost Phone* affords a reflection on the ways in which devices and activity on these devices help narrate and shape the story of *me*.

8.3. Teaching as design, diffractive practice and the TEFL practitioner

One argument that has repeatedly been made within this dissertation is that when vernacular games are chiefly approached through pre-digital frames for language education, their inherent disruptiveness as media will continue to inconvenience learning. In contrast, in approaching games as rich with new meanings that are constitutive of participating in digital cultures, these same games have intrinsic value as part of education's continuing confrontation with a post-digital cultural condition. In tackling what this means for teaching *practice*, I rely again on perspectives shaped through (especially Baradian) sociomaterialism:

a) Attending to 'black boxes of practice': Relational pedagogies and diffractive practice

Even where digital games are considered valuable as cultural media in language education, they still lack much of the support that other media receive in the field. Due to the variability of the medium, there are few concrete scripts that apply to all gametexts. In regarding the digital as a relational phenomenon (as Stalder does; see Stalder 2018)[127], Kern's Relational Pedagogy offers one approach (Kern 2015) – however, as articulated in Chapter 2.3. more needs to be done to move beyond sets of heuristic questions and into action-oriented pedagogical toolkits that are appropriate for the pre-collegiate learner. Toolkits are additionally needed for educators to '*reflect'* on the process of bridging digital games into the classroom – from pre-evaluation, to design, to post-evaluation and iteration. Barad offers one such tool in their

[127] "Media are relational technologies, which means that they facilitate certain types of connection between humans and objects. "Digital" thus denotes the set of relations that, on the infrastructural basis of digital networks, is realized today in the production, use, and transformation of material and immaterial goods, and in the constitution and coordination of personal and collective activity. In this regard, the focus is less on the dominance of a certain class of technological artifacts - the computer, for instance - and even less on distinguishing between "digital" and "analog," "material" and "immaterial." […] "Digital" thus refers to historically new possibilities for constituting and connecting various human and non-human actors, which is not limited to digital media but rather appears everywhere as a relational paradigm that alters the realm of possibility for numerous materials and actors. My understanding of the digital thus approximates the concept of the "post-digital," which has been gaining currency over the past few years within critical media cultures.)" (Stalder 2018, n.p.)

'diffractive methodology' – which I will attempt to translate into a 'diffractive practice' for the purposes of education. Barad asserts that "theoretical tools [are] needed to move conversations […] beyond the mere acknowledgement that both material and discursive, and natural and cultural, factors play a role in knowledge production by examining how these factors work together, and how conceptions of materiality, social practice, nature, and discourse must change to accommodate their mutual involvement." (Barad 2007, 25). In asserting 'diffractive practice' as a compliment to 'reflective practice' – whereas the notion of 'reflective practice' currently dominates in language teacher education – I would turn to Barad's discussion of their own preference for the metaphore of diffraction over reflection:

The 'diffraction' metaphor is one that Barad has taken up from Donna Haraway – whose Cyborg Manifesto was referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Barad argues that Haraway's metaphor of diffraction "can serve as a useful counterpoint to reflection: both are optical phenomena, but whereas reflection is about mirroring and sameness, diffraction attends to patterns of difference." (ibid., 29). They further assert:

> "a diffractive methodology is respectful of the entanglement of ideas and other materials in ways that reflexive methodologies are not. In particular, what is needed is a method attuned to the entanglement of the apparatuses of production, one that enables genealogical analyses of how boundaries are produced rather than presuming sets of well-worn binaries in advance […] diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter." (ibid., 29-30)

As was hopefully demonstrated in my own diffractive reading of game media in this dissertation – through the lenses of Game Studies and TEFL; as well as through the methodological lenses of games as task environments, expressive media and cultural discourse – diffractive readings can highlight different *contours* of relationality. In addressing digital games as 'black boxes of practice' (Fenwick 2015), diffractive readings function similarly to echolocation at sea – it feeds back different pictures of reality (*contours* of relationality) that are responsive to whatever assemblage we use in formulating our apparatuses of engagement with digital media. An assemblage consists of multiple pedagogic designs: for example, backward, forward, process-based à la Richards 2017; individual, material, social resources à la Kern 2015; additive vs. expressive media à la Murray 2017a; or the lenses of task environment, expressive text and cultural discourse as these have been developed here. It is not the matter of having the 'right' frame, but rather paying attention to where these readings intersect – with resonance, with dissonance – and then to read further. Within this view, methodological dissonances can be approached with curiosity – as just one example from this dissertation, the dissonance that exists between action and narrative in

complementary ludonarratives (Chapter 3.3.) – and not as something that needs to be made 'tidy' or made 'congruent' with known approaches lest it be discarded entirely. Within this view, these dissonances can be treated as a 'feature', and not as a 'bug'.

b) Entangled accountabilities within the digital transformation of formal education

In engaging in diffractive practice, Barad asserts that "*we are a part of the nature that we seek to understand* […] our ability to understand the world hinges on our taking account of the fact that our knowledge-making practices are social-material enactments that contribute to, and are a part of, the phenomena we describe" (Barad 2007, 26). In other words: How we evaluate gametexts – – through which apparatuses – matters. It impacts how we design for them and implicates how we read the results of our designs-in-action. This was addressed somewhat in Chapter 2.2. in which we saw how the affordances and constraints of gameplay is contingent on the curricular and pedagogical designs that we use to make sense of them.

It is additionally important to note, however, that this accountability doesn't belong to educators alone. Rather, the whole ecology of formal education is implicated: as this relates to the formulation of both the goals and values that underpin formal education in Germany, the curation of good gametexts and the design of support materials, the outfitting of schools with technologies and digital infrastructures all matter in addition to the practices of individual educators. Additionally, although this dissertation is specifically concerned with re-negotiating the *evaluative discourses* applied to digital games in language education, addressing the promise and problem of games in language education (see Chapter 1.1.) is unlikely a problem of discourses alone. It is instead a performative problem[128] – a mismatch of material-discursive educational ecologies with the material-discursive realities of a digital culture that is present even when there aren't any devices in the room. As argued by Kern (2015):

> "On the one hand, individuals have greater control than ever over the communication technologies they use – they have unprecedented access to the means of textual production and distribution (now literally on a global scale). On the other hand, individuals are increasingly

[128] "Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real. Hence, in ironic contrast to the misconception that would equate performativity with a form of linguistic monism that takes language to be the stuff of reality, **performativity is properly understood as a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve.**" (Barad 2007, 133; emphasis mine)

> subject to control by those very same technologies. Much of our work, play, and communication now involves computers, and we have little choice but to acquiesce to the computer's particular ways of doing things. By virtue of their symbolic sophistication, **digital technologies probably go further than any previous medium in shaping our creative impulses and setting the parameters of what we consider to be our world. And they often do so without our being aware of it.**" (Kern 2015, 21; emphasis mine)

What does 'accountability' and 'agency' then look like for educators when confronted with the force with which the impacts of digital culture implicate their practice? As argued by Barad, "Agency is not about choice in the liberal humanist sense; agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices." (Barad 2007, 218). To use simpler language, I would argue that this view aligns with perspectives that consider teaching practice as a 'design challenge'.

c) Teaching as 'design' and as 'play'

In taking up this consideration of teaching as design, I would end with reference to Matthew Koehler, Mishra Punya and co-authors (2011) approach to this issue. Koehler et al. (2011) – a group which notably includes the authors of the TPACK framework (see also Chapter 1.2.2.) – have argued for a design-orientation to teacher education in response to digital media which involves tasking educators with working collaboratively to solve problems related to technology use in education (ibid., 151). In embracing design principles for teacher education, they argue that similar to design, teaching practice is as much a science as an art, requires a wide array of knowledge leveraged meaningfully and in creative ways, and involves an iterative process of reflection and re-design within a climate of experimentation and 'play' (see also Chapter 2.2.). They argue: "design is essentially a dialogue between ideas and world, theory and its application, a concept and its realisation, tools and goals. We see this dialogue as being at the heart of true inquiry, involving as it does the construction of meaning and the evolution of understanding through a dialogic, transactional process." (ibid., 152).

A question that I feel is important to pose is what could a 'culture of practise' look like that can afford such design orientations without further overburdening educators? Although it is not assumed that this represents a full answer to this question, Koehler et al. (2011) pose 'deep-play' as a compliment to the approach of teaching as design, which "encourages learners to 'play' with technology even while reflecting on deeper issues related to content and pedagogy." (ibid., 154). They further assert:

> "most technologies have not been designed for educational purposes. It is only through melioration (i.e., the creative repurposing of technology) that teachers can seek to meet the

> potential of technology for educational purposes. Play is the context within which such melioration/repurposing can occur. Play allows teachers to explore and invent, without fear of failure, to see pedagogical possibilities in the everyday technologies and to think of new ways of representing content.
>
> The ill-structured and complex nature of design makes it difficult to teach. **There are no overarching laws of design** that apply across all cases and there are no context-free uses of tools (software or hardware). The deep-play approach **rejects functional fixedness** with respect to tool use and emphasises the value of re-seeing problems to develop unique and creative solutions that apply TK, PK and CK [i.e. elements of the TPACK model]. What is common to all these activities is that they force students to look at the tools they have in terms of their inherent **constraints and affordances** and asks them to think carefully and creatively about how to leverage these to meet their design goals." (ibid., 2011, 154; emphasis mine)

Although Koehler et al 2011 have not adopted a sociomaterial framing in their research, several of the ideas that I have marked above are resonant within Baradian concerns. In taking on this view, it is within multiple levels then that the use of ludonarrative media in language education engages with the 'possibility spaces' of play. Their empirical approach to design orientations in teacher education is a promising perspective for further research into this field.

SUMMARY

'EMBRACING THE SINGING MACHINES'
A PATH FORWARD FOR LUDONARRATIVE MEDIA
IN FORMAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION

In closing this dissertation, I would like to return to the research questions that opened this discussion:

a) How might the material-discursive landscape of narrative digital games in and around language education be (re)negotiated and (re)formulated into an evaluative apparatus for working with narrative digital games (i.e. ludonarratives) as cultural, expressive media in the formal, secondary EFL classroom?
b) What designs for learning are implicated within such an evaluative apparatus – particularly as regards engaging with ludonarratives as task environments, expressive texts and cultural discourse?
c) What are the implications of designing for learning with ludonarrative media in language education, particularly as concerns the role of ludonarratives, of educators and of the agendas of TEFL within the digital transformation of formal education?

In response to a): the material-discursive landscape of narrative digital games has been negotiated in this dissertation through a sociomaterial lens. This lens emphasizes the need to re-consider taken-for-granted concepts in relation to game media in language education for the purposes of formulating an evaluative discourse for educators that will be supportive of their engagements with narrative game media. Within a Baradian approach to sociomaterial theoretical inquiry, this dissertation has relied largely on their "diffractive methodology" (Barad 2007) in re-negotiating and re-formulating discourses relating to game media in language education. A 'diffractive reading' of the discourses of TEFL and Game Studies afforded the formulation of my 'Ludonarrative Framework for Narrative Digital Games in TEFL' which negotiates the tensions of 'narrative' and 'gameplay' in digital gametexts and the implications of this tension within three methodological frames of TEFL: narrative games as task environments, as expressive texts and as cultural discourse.

In response to b): In attending to the full meaning-making potential of narrative digital games, a literacies-informed perspective on language education is particularly useful in attending to digital games within the three methodological frames of digital games as task environments,

expressive texts and as cultural discourse. This is especially true where the task environment of games is inseparable from a game's narrative discourse (entangled ludonarrativity) and expressive qualities (within a ludic aesthetics), and where extending gameplay roles into the interactional task environment of the classroom affords further negotiation of expressive and cultural meanings. In addressing narrative digital games as situated in cultural discourses, it is additionally helpful to articulate game cultural roles for learners in more detail, in which they respond to and act on game media in the capacity of game audiences, game specialists and/or as game creators. It is finally argued that in working with ludonarratives that sit at the crux of culture, text and task, it is possible to afford engagements with meaning that are specific to a 'post-digital cultural condition' (see Stalder 2018; Berry & Dieter 2015).

In response to c): It is argued that the most 'disruptive' aspects of engaging with ludonarratives in the formal language classroom are the same aspects that most 'speak' to a 'post-digital cultural condition' and the "new claims to meaning" (Stalder 2018, n.p.) that are so confounding for formal education. A cyborg pedagogy that might be able to tackle these "new claims to meaning" is proposed which can attend to pedagogical situations in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to 'separate the learner from the machine'. Ludonarratives are considered valuable in their expressive capacity to thematically and performatively explore the difficult relationalities at the interface of digital and human intra-actions. In terms of how educators are implicated in a cyborg pedagogy, the Baradian-informed notion of 'diffractive practice' has been proposed alongside a treatment of teaching as 'play' and as 'design'.

APPENDIX
SUMMARY OF DISSERTATION IN GERMAN / *ZUSAMMENFASSUNG DER DISSERTATION AUF DEUTSCH*

Abstrakt

Vernakuläre digitale Spiele – d. h. Spiele, die nicht speziell für das Erlernen von Sprachen entwickelt wurden (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013; Reinhardt 2019) – stellen nach wie vor eine Herausforderung für die konsequente Integration in den EFL-Unterricht (Englisch als Fremdsprache) dar. Einerseits sind digitale Spiele ein kulturell bedeutendes Medium, das tief in die Lebenswelten der Lernenden integriert ist und Lernprozesse auf einzigartige Weise aktivieren kann. Insbesondere narrative digitale Spiele, die im Zentrum dieser Dissertation stehen, thematisieren auf sinnvolle Weise das Leben und die Interaktion in einer digital vielfältigen, interface-beladenen und identitätsverwirrenden Welt. Trotz ihres Potenzials sind narrative digitale Spiele in formalen EFL-Klassenzimmern weniger präsent als andere authentische Medien von kultureller Bedeutung und werden oft als schwierig in der Handhabung oder als ungeeignet für die Anforderungen des formellen Bildungswesens beschrieben. Mit der Annäherung an diese Kluft zwischen Möglichkeit und Praxis aus einer soziomateriellen Perspektive strebt diese Dissertation an, bestehende und neu gemischte Diskurse über Spiel- und Medienstudien, diskurs- und literaturbasierte Ansätze des Sprachenlernens und -lehrens sowie die formulierten Ziele der formalen Fremdsprachenbildung neu zu bewerten. Die Dissertation zeigt auf, wie diese neu geführten Diskurse neue Wege für Pädagog:innen eröffnen könnten, um mit narrativen digitalen Spielen im EFL-Klassenzimmer zu arbeiten und die fortlaufende sowie tiefgreifende digitale Transformation der formellen Sprachbildung an Sekundarschulen zu navigieren.

Zu diesem Zweck stellt die Dissertation die folgenden Forschungsfragen:

a) Wie könnte die materiell-diskursive Landschaft narrativer digitaler Spiele im Bereich der Sprachbildung neu bewertet und in ein Evaluationsinstrument („Apparatus“, Barad 2007) überführt werden, um mit narrativen digitalen Spielen als kulturell-ausdrucksstarken Medien im formalen EFL-Klassenzimmer der Sekundarstufe zu arbeiten?
b) Welche Lernkonzepte sind in einem solchen Evaluationsinstrument impliziert – insbesondere in Bezug auf die Auseinandersetzung mit narrativen digitalen Spielen als ‚Task Environment‘, ‚Expressive Text‘ und ‚Cultural Discourse‘?

c) Welche Konsequenzen ergeben sich aus der Gestaltung von Lernprozessen mit digitalen Erzählmedien im Sprachunterricht, insbesondere hinsichtlich der Rolle narrativer digitaler Spiele, der Pädagog:innen und der TEFL-Ziele im Kontext der digitalen Transformation der formalen Bildung?

Zusammenfassung von Teil I

Im Bestreben, narrative digitale Spiele für den formellen Sekundarschul-Sprachunterricht zugänglicher zu machen, stellt diese Dissertation die These auf, dass unterstützendere evaluative Diskurse für das Medium notwendig sind. Bei der Formulierung neuer evaluativer Diskurse stützt sie sich auf eine soziomaterielle Perspektive in der theoretischen Untersuchung. Wie Cathy Mills argumentiert, entfernt eine soziomaterielle Perspektive „die konzeptuellen Scheuklappen, die verdecken, wie Bildungspraktiken durch Materialien geformt werden" (Mills 2016, xxiii), und räumt damit dem Materiellen (einschließlich des Immateriellen oder Abstrakten) eine aktivere Rolle in Bildungstheorie und -praxis ein. Darüber hinaus hinterfragt eine soziomaterielle Sichtweise selbstverständlich gewordene Diskurse – in diesem Fall solche, die zentral für die Sprachbildung und die Game Studies sind – und begegnet konzeptuellen Spannungen oder sogenannten *black boxes of practice* (Fenwick 2015) mit Neugier.

Die Dissertation stützt sich dabei besonders auf einen baradianischen Ansatz in der theoretischen Untersuchung, insbesondere auf Barads Vorstellung einer „diffraktiven Methodologie", „einem transdisziplinären Ansatz, der rigoros auf wichtige Details spezialisierter Argumente innerhalb eines gegebenen Feldes achtet, um konstruktive Engagements über (und eine Neugestaltung von) disziplinären Grenzen hinweg zu fördern" (Barad 2007, 25).

In einer diffraktiven Lesung der Diskurse von TEFL und Game Studies wird besondere Aufmerksamkeit auf die Versammlung von Faktoren gelegt (*assemblages*), die zu einem evaluativen *apparatus* für Spielmedien in der Sprachbildung beitragen könnten. Ein Schwerpunkt liegt auf etablierten Lehrplaninstrumenten und pädagogischen Ansätzen, die für den formellen deutschen Sekundarschulkontext relevant sind – einschließlich des Gemeinsamen Europäischen Referenzrahmens für Sprachen (GER) und des kommunikativen Sprachunterrichts (CLT). Unter einem solchen Kommunikationsmodell könnten digitale Spiele möglicherweise schlecht abschneiden, da es bewusst unkritisch und agnostisch gegenüber dem Wert ästhetischer textueller Auseinandersetzung in der Sprachbildung ist, sich weitgehend auf die Bedeutungserzeugung durch die Zielsprache konzentriert (statt auf multimodale Bedeutungen) und die Bedingungen digitaler Textualität nur unzureichend berücksichtigt.

Literacies-informierte Perspektiven auf die Sprachpädagogik werden herangezogen, um einige der blinden Flecken des GER und des CLT zu schließen. Insbesondere wird auf Kommunikation als Design (NLG 1997; Kern 2015), Multimodalität (NLG 1997), einen relationalen Ansatz zu Medien (Kern 2015) und die Betrachtung digitaler Spiele als semiotische Domänen (Gee 2003) verwiesen.

Ein relationaler Ansatz zu den sehr unterschiedlichen semiotischen Domänen digitaler Spielwelten lenkt die Aufmerksamkeit auf additive und expressive Aspekte des Spieldesigns (Murray 2017a). Während ein additiver Ansatz das Entlehnen von anderen expressiven Medien und deren semiotischen Konventionen umfasst, berücksichtigt ein expressiver Ansatz die Affordanzen, die spezifisch für digitale Spielmedien sind.

In dieser Diskussion wird wiederholt betont, dass digitale Spiele *possibility spaces* (Salen & Zimmerman 2004) sind: Orte, an denen Bedeutung in Handlung auf unvorhersehbare Weise zwischen Spieler:innen und Spielwelt ko-kreiert wird. Dies wird als Merkmal des Mediums verstanden – nicht als Mangel. Stabile strukturell-funktionale Lesarten von Spieltexten reichen daher nicht aus, um die emergenten oder performativen Bedeutungen zu erfassen, die sich zwischen Spiel und Spielenden „in Aktion" entfalten.

Zusammenfassung von Teil II

Kapitel 3 der Dissertation führt mein *Ludonarrative Framework for Narrative Digital Games in TEFL* ein, das durch die Analyse der „Spannung" zwischen Narrativ und Gameplay mithilfe der methodologischen Rahmen *narrative Spiele als task environment*, *als expressive text* und *als cultural discourse* entwickelt wurde. Der Kerngedanke dieses Rahmens ist, dass die Qualität der ludonarrativen *Intra-Action* in einem Spieletext Auswirkungen darauf hat, wie Bedeutung zwischen Spieler:in und Spielwelt durch Spielerhandlungen ausgehandelt werden kann und welche methodologischen Implikationen sich daraus für die drei Rahmen ergeben.

Wo Narrativ und Spielerhandlungen eng verflochten sind, lässt sich eine starke Resonanz zwischen den Perspektiven *Spiel als task environment* und *Spiel als expressive text* beobachten (‚entangled ludonarrativity'). In Spielen hingegen, in denen das Narrativ eher additiv – etwa über spielbasierte Mechaniken oder in Form von Filmsequenzen – realisiert wird, kann die Beziehung zwischen dem *task environment* des Spiels und seiner Behandlung als *expressive text* variabler ausfallen (‚komplementäre Ludonarrativität'). Diese Zusammenhänge werden in den folgenden drei Kapiteln, die jeweils einen der drei genannten methodologischen Rahmen behandeln, näher ausgeführt.

a) Narrative digitale Spiele als *task environments* (Kapitel 4)

- Zielgerichtete Aktivitäten, die Spieler:innen in einem Spiel unternehmen, können mit dem Begriff der *task* in der Fremdsprachenbildung bewertet werden.
- Diese Bewertung kann klassische Merkmale von Aufgaben berücksichtigen (angesiedelt in einem funktional-kommunikativen Verständnis von Sprachenlernen, wie es derzeit im bayerischen Lehrplan festgeschrieben ist), sollte aber auch eine literacies-informierte Perspektive einbeziehen – insbesondere dort, wo die semiotische Domäne des Spiels Spieler:innen in eine anhaltende Aushandlung von Bedeutung einbindet, über den sprachlichen Modus und die Zielsprache hinaus.
- Eine literacies-informierte Perspektive auf TBL befasst sich mit Spiel-als-Diskurs-Praktiken, die durch die semiotische Domäne der Spielwelt ermöglicht werden, besonders wenn solche Praktiken eine aktive und zielgerichtete Aushandlung von Bedeutung zwischen Spieler:in und Spielwelt erfordern. Wie Bedeutung durch Spielerhandlungen ausgehandelt wird, hängt zudem von der Anzahl und Vielfalt iterativer bzw. neuer Aktionen ab, die im Spielverlauf vorkommen. Iterative Handlung kann Sprachübung sein – muss es aber nicht. Narrative Handlung kann als ludonarrative Lücke zwischen Spieler:in und Spielwelt oder zwischen verschiedenen Spieler:innen, die dieselbe Spielwelt durchlaufen, verhandelt werden (eine Aushandlung, die sich ins *task environment* des Klassenzimmers hinein verlängern kann).
- Das *task environment* des Spiels intra-agiert mit den *task environments* des Klassenzimmers und der weiteren Welt. Entwürfe für Spiele als *task environments* können diese Verflechtungen nutzen. Dies kann beinhalten, dass Spielthemen und -narrative im interaktionalen Kontext des Klassenzimmers ausgehandelt werden (z. B. im Sinne literarischen und kulturellen Lernens), aber auch, dass Rollen aus der Gamer-Kultur ins Klassenzimmer integriert oder Spielrollen aus der Spielwelt ins Klassenzimmer projiziert werden.

b) Narrative digitale Spiele als *expressive texts* (Kapitel 5)

- Digitale Spiele können als expressives Medium betrachtet werden, vergleichbar mit den bildenden Künsten, der Literatur, dem Film oder anderen performativen Künsten.
- Aus dieser Sicht können Ansätze und Methodologien des TEFL zum Umgang mit expressiven Medien (z. B. literarisches oder filmisches Lernen; siehe Lütge 2018) auf digitale Spiele ausgeweitet werden. Zentrale Prinzipien sind: das Fördern evokativer und interpretativer Reaktionen auf Spiele, die Aushandlung solcher Reaktionen im

interaktionalen Kontext des Klassenzimmers sowie die Berücksichtigung, wie expressive Bedeutungen im Dialog mit größeren kulturellen Themen, Ideologien und Praktiken stehen.

- Die Vertrautheit mit expressiven Konventionen, die spezifisch für digitale Spiele sind, kann Lehrenden und Lernenden dabei helfen, das ästhetische Spielerlebnis zu artikulieren und ihre individuellen Reaktionen auf Spiele als *expressive texts* im Klassenzimmer zu vertiefen. Besonders zu beachten sind: Merkmale einer ludischen Ästhetik (Spieler-Charakter, Spielwelt als materielle Begegnung, Spielerengagement und -fluss, Wahlmöglichkeiten und Konfigurationen); die Förderung ludischer narrativer Diskurskompetenz; sowie das Bewusstsein für prozedurale narrative Strukturen, die performative und improvisatorische Natur des Spielens und die ideologischen Verflechtungen in Spielgeschichten.

c) Narrative digitale Spiele als *cultural discourse* (Kapitel 6)

- Digitale Spiele können als kultureller Inhalt verstanden werden und sind in kulturelle Diskurse eingebettet.
- In der Annäherung an Spiele als *cultural discourse* können sie genutzt werden als: (1) Repräsentationen einer Zielkultur (z. B. durch Themen, Geschichten, Umgebungen), (2) interkulturelle Begegnungen (wo Spieler:innen Rollen übernehmen, die Begegnungen mit dem kulturellen „Anderen" ermöglichen), und/oder (3) Räume für Ausdruck, Performance und Aushandlung von Identität, Zugehörigkeit und Ideologie.
- Spiele als kulturellen Inhalt zu verhandeln, kann herausfordernd sein, da sie Teil einer größeren digitalen Welt sind, die traditionelle Vorstellungen von Kultur infrage stellt, wie sie im kulturellen Lernen oft verstanden werden.
- Die Auseinandersetzung mit den kulturellen Diskursen, in die Spiele eingebunden sind, kann dadurch erleichtert werden, dass Lernende über verschiedene Rollen der Gamer-Kultur an diesen Diskursen teilnehmen: z. B. als Spielaudienzen, als Spielspezialist:innen oder als Spieleschöpfer:innen.

Zusammenfassung von Teil III

Kapitel 7 der Dissertation bekräftigt zentrale Punkte der vorangegangenen Abschnitte:

- Bedeutung in Spielen wird performativ innerhalb des *possibility space* einer Spielwelt durch Handlung ausgehandelt.

- Spiele als Orte potenzieller Bedeutungen können diffraktiv durch verschiedene methodologische Linsen bewertet werden, die „Bedeutung als Handlung“ jeweils auf unterschiedliche Weise erweitern.
- Eine diffraktive Lesart zielt nicht darauf ab, den „richtigen“ Rahmen für die Arbeit mit einem bestimmten Spiel zu identifizieren. Vielmehr erleichtert sie das Erkennen und Nutzen inter-methodologischer Resonanzen und Dissonanzen.

Zur Unterstützung wird eine Tabelle mit heuristischen Fragen angeboten, die bei der Durchführung diffraktiver Bewertungen von Spieletexten gestellt werden können. Darüber hinaus bietet das Kapitel kuratierte Kategorien zur Erkundung ludonarrativer Medien – insbesondere embodiable Spielwelten (z. B. grafische Abenteuer, Walking Simulatoren, Slice-of-Life-Simulatoren) und textuelle Spielwelten (z. B. *readerly games* und Interface-Fiktionen).

Kapitel 8 argumentiert, dass Ludonarrative von besonderer Relevanz für die *post-digitale kulturelle Kondition* sind, in der wir uns befinden. Es wird dargelegt, dass Pädagogiken – im Sinne von Cyborg-Pädagogiken – entwickelt werden müssen, die pädagogische Situationen adressieren, in denen Bildungsakteure nicht vollständig von der Maschine getrennt werden können.

Zum Abschluss der Dissertation wird auf die eingangs formulierten Forschungsfragen zurückgekommen:

a) Wie könnte die materiell-diskursive Landschaft narrativer digitaler Spiele im Bereich der Sprachbildung neu bewertet und in ein Evaluationsinstrument („Apparatus“, Barad 2007) überführt werden, um mit narrativen digitalen Spielen als kulturell-ausdrucksstarken Medien im formalen EFL-Klassenzimmer der Sekundarstufe zu arbeiten?
b) Welche Lernkonzepte sind in einem solchen Evaluationsinstrument impliziert – insbesondere in Bezug auf die Auseinandersetzung mit narrativen digitalen Spielen als ‚Task Environment‘, ‚Expressive Text‘ und ‚Cultural Discourse‘?
c) Welche Konsequenzen ergeben sich aus der Gestaltung von Lernprozessen mit digitalen Erzählmedien im Sprachunterricht, insbesondere hinsichtlich der Rolle narrativer digitaler Spiele, der Pädagog:innen und der TEFL-Ziele im Kontext der digitalen Transformation der formalen Bildung?

Als Antwort auf a): Die materiell-diskursive Landschaft narrativer digitaler Spiele wurde durch eine soziomaterielle Linse betrachtet. Diese Perspektive betont die Notwendigkeit, selbstverständliche Konzepte in Bezug auf Spielmedien in der Sprachbildung neu zu überdenken, um einen evaluativen Diskurs zu entwickeln, der Pädagog:innen bei der Auseinandersetzung mit narrativen Spielen unterstützt. Innerhalb eines baradianischen Ansatzes zur soziomateriellen

Theoriearbeit stützt sich die Dissertation weitgehend auf Barads *diffractive methodology* (2007), um Diskurse im Zusammenhang mit Spielmedien neu zu verhandeln und zu reformulieren. Eine diffraktive Lesart der Diskurse von TEFL und Game Studies ermöglichte die Formulierung des *Ludonarrative Framework for Narrative Digital Games in TEFL*, das die Spannungen zwischen Narrativ und Gameplay sowie deren Implikationen in drei methodologischen Rahmen verhandelt: Spiele als *task environments*, als *expressive texts* und als *cultural discourse*.

Als Antwort auf b): Zur Erschließung des vollen Bedeutungspotenzials narrativer digitaler Spiele ist eine literacies-informierte Perspektive besonders hilfreich. Sie erlaubt es, Spiele in allen drei methodologischen Rahmen – *task environment*, *expressive text* und *cultural discourse* – differenziert zu betrachten. Dies gilt insbesondere dort, wo das *task environment* untrennbar mit dem narrativen Diskurs eines Spiels verflochten ist (‚entangled ludonarrativity'), dessen expressive Qualitäten innerhalb einer ludischen Ästhetik hervortreten und Spielrollen in das interaktionale *task environment* des Klassenzimmers übertragen werden können. Für Spiele, die in kulturellen Diskursen verortet sind, ist es zudem wertvoll, die kulturellen Rollen von Spielen für Lernende genauer zu artikulieren – sei es in der Rolle als Spielaudienzen, als Spielspezialist:innen oder als Spieleschöpfer:innen. Abschließend wird argumentiert, dass die Arbeit mit Ludonarrativen, die an der Schnittstelle von Kultur, Text und Aufgabe stehen, eine Auseinandersetzung mit Bedeutungen eröffnet, die spezifisch für eine *post-digitale kulturelle Kondition* sind (vgl. Stalder 2018; Berry & Dieter 2015).

Als Antwort auf c): Es wird argumentiert, dass gerade die „disruptivsten" Aspekte der Auseinandersetzung mit Ludonarrativen im formellen Sprachunterricht diejenigen sind, die am deutlichsten auf die *post-digitale kulturelle Kondition* und auf die „neuen Ansprüche an Bedeutung" (Stalder 2018, n.p.) verweisen, die das Bildungssystem herausfordern. Vorgeschlagen wird daher eine Cyborg-Pädagogik, die pädagogische Situationen berücksichtigt, in denen es schwierig, wenn nicht unmöglich ist, „Lernende von der Maschine zu trennen". Ludonarrative werden dabei als wertvoll erachtet, um die komplexen Relationalitäten an der Schnittstelle digitaler und menschlicher *Intra-Actions* thematisch und performativ zu erkunden. In Bezug auf die Rolle der Lehrenden in einer solchen Cyborg-Pädagogik wird – inspiriert von Barad – die Vorstellung einer *diffraktiven Praxis* vorgeschlagen, ergänzt durch eine Auffassung von Lehren als „Spiel" und als „Design".

* Diese Übersetzung entstand unter Einsatz KI-gestützter digitaler Werkzeuge (z. B. DeepL, ChatGPT-4, ChatGPT-5). Die originale englische Fassung ohne KI-Beteiligung kann auf Anfrage eingesehen werden.

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