GAME-BASED LANGUAGE AND CONTENT LEARNING WITH TOWNSHIP

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The virtual game Township, by Playrix, creates a rich environment for all kinds of language and content learning. This free game revolves around a town that is built by the player. Because it is language immersive, it has many promising features for second and foreign language learning. Its features also make the game a great tool for the general education classroom.

In Township, the player is the governor of a new town. At the beginning of the game, he or she is given an amount of money and a few buildings to get started. In order to grow their town, the governor must produce merchandise to attract customers; in the beginning, this is limited to farming goods (milk, eggs, and wheat), but by producing and selling more items, a governor is soon able to build factories and diversify the town's industries. As the town grows, there is an accompanying need for more housing, schools, hospitals, roads, and entertainment areas. All these actions require investment, but ultimately, they generate the revenue that sustains the town. In the game, the player, as governor, must make decisions on how to build, where to place factories, agricultural lands, train stations, airports, and more.

One important feature of the game is the fact that it can be played in 15 languages,[1] making it a perfect companion for a language classroom as well as a liaison for learners of different backgrounds. Even if the player does not currently speak any of the languages in the game, he or she can still use the images to create meaning and learn vocabulary and expressions. In Township, every building and product made or sold is labeled, allowing the player to repeatedly see a great amount of language while accomplishing such tasks as feeding the cows or making fast-food products, baked goods, or fabrics. This kind of repetition builds a context in which a student, when playing the game, can learn words that do not necessarily relate to social language but can be useful in an academic setting.

Township provides a variety of scenarios in which to pursue experiential learning (Kolb, 1984)—concepts such as supply and demand, population patterns, and money transactions can be highly abstract, more so for ELLs. While performing the game tasks, students build background knowledge that can be used to understand more complex concepts, creating as well a tangible space in which students can understand and apply the skills they are learning. After using the language of the game to teach a concept, the teacher can elevate the level of discourse, anchoring the new concepts into that knowledge to which all students have built access. Given the social, cultural, or economic diversity of students' backgrounds, not only among ELLs but among all students, it seems appropriate to use a game like Township to build common vocabulary and experiences, creating a level ground of knowledge on which students can build concepts and skills.

Township has many advantages over similarly popular games. Fortnite by Epic Games is a highly popular cooperative game that has recently expanded to include multiple languages and can be played in different devices. It requires a paid subscription, however, and its popularity has caused it to be banned in many school districts due to its high usage of bandwidth and the distractions it causes during academic hours (Schwartz, 2018). Another popular game is Plague Inc by Ndemic Creations. This one also offers

multiple languages and has a lot of text, but as a strategic game, it has a beginning and an end. In addition, it requires players to be constantly engaged, and does not allow for cooperative tasks. As a social network game (SNG), Township includes features such as asynchronous multiplayer gaming, rewards for sharing, and feedback loops that provide endless tasks. These characteristics, from the teaching perspective, provide a space for cooperation and peer interaction (Söbke & Londong, 2015). Games that require collaborative quests create a latent pressure to continue playing, consequently providing opportunities for communication and problem solving. Township engages players in collaborative expeditions; students can join cooperatives to share products, embark on team quests to gain experience and money, or even visit their friends and "like" their town. These seemingly simple tasks engage players by appealing to their senses of efficacy and control (Breuer & Bente, 2010).

The language classroom is a natural fit for Township. Because the game provides a language-rich environment and visuals that reduce the need for automated translation, the player is exposed to language in a way that allows for learning and acquisition (Cook, 2016). In addition to a good amount of vocabulary, the game provides a variety of registers that teach language uses not necessarily accounted for in the curriculum. In the game, the characters differ in demographics, ranging from school-age children to professionals such as movie directors, miners, and firefighters. The game uses diverse registers in the exchanges to account for those differences, presenting a good opportunity for developing lexical bundles that can be used in other contexts.

At the cultural level, those same interactions provide resources to discuss the linguistic differences among people. Township could facilitate learning specialized jargon from different communities, as well as idiomatic expressions from specific cultures or regions. The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012a) emphasizes the importance of teaching in the target language (TL); they recommend staying in the TL at least 90 percent of the learning time. Given the characteristics of this game, it is possible to develop a wide variety of activities to practice language in authentic ways as well as assessments that meet the ACTFL standards in different modes of communication and proficiency levels (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012b). Teachers can use the platform as a springboard of opportunities for communication. Writing descriptive pamphlets of their town, invitations to town events, applying for jobs, and discussions about issues in the town are among the many possibilities for language production.

A drawback of the game is the fact that it does not include voices, which would be beneficial for learning pronunciation and for listening activities. This could be overcome by the teacher creating audio materials for game-related activities or asking students to produce their own spoken materials. Another possible drawback is the intuitive nature of the game, which may cause players to dismiss the language of the game and use the images to navigate it. Developing purposeful activities will help ensure the maximum exposure and utilization of the language of the game. Finally, when using games in education it is advisable to limit the class activities related to the game to prevent students from feeling lost in this learning environment or to discard the learning opportunity as a waste of time.

By incorporating game-based learning into the curriculum, students have access to the motivational and affective tools that these kinds of games offer. In the elementary and secondary school classrooms, Township could provide support for language learning through teacher-developed activities that use the vocabulary and environment of the game as a tangible asset. In the social studies, mathematics, and science classrooms, this game can be used as a scaffolding tool for diverse learners.

While there are a myriad of popular games in the market, the simplicity of Township, accompanied by its multilingual features, make it a good choice for a diverse classroom. For the game to work as intended in this document, it is suggested that every student download the application to a device,[2] and play it a few times under teacher supervision. From then on, the students are expected to play as they need (for language purpose) or in relation to classroom assignments. While teachers should always evaluate any

games considering the needs of their individual learners, Township provides a wealth of opportunities for mixed and ELL classrooms.

References

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Notes

[1]The languages currently supported are English, Spanish, Italian, Russian, simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, Portuguese, German, French, Dutch, Korean, Indonesian, Turkish, and Arabic.

[2]At the time of this document, the game is downloadable through App store, Google play, Amazon apps, Windows phone store, and Mac app (Playrix, 2019).

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