30.

Occupied Paris

Cultural Immersion in the Past

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Abstract

Session presented results from two pilot tests of *Paris Occupé*, a role-playing game created in ARIS where students complete tasks and make choices in three “chapters” tied to different aspects of Parisian life during Nazi Occupation (World War II). The complexity of the period with its multiple governments, difficult living conditions and moral/ethical choices make it both interesting and challenging to teach. Typically, students minimize the complexity of the time and simply claim “I would have resisted,” as if it were an easy choice. Role-play personalizes the experience for students while giving them both mandatory tasks and free choices (all historically accurate). Individual student game play was supported by class activities to build historical understanding. Results of pilot tests show growth in language production, complexity of reasoning and empathy with the past.

Description of Paris Occupé

Paris Occupé is an ARIS-based game in development for use by Intermediate to Intermediate-High-level French language learners in a university classroom. During the two pilot projects, three chapters related to time periods during the Nazi occupation of Paris were studied using the instructor-created role-playing game (RPG). This virtual world implements game design mechanics to scaffold and enrich student learning through player agency, leveling up, chunking information and a rich multimedia environment.

The goals of this project are to enhance linguistic development in a meaningful setting, create a “deeper” understanding of historical events (depth vs. breadth) through historical empathy and critical thinking, and to support ethical development in young adults. In the context of this game, the combination of historical information learned through more traditional course materials (fiction and nonfiction in various media) plus the personal, emotional engagement with their RPG character, helps students engage in higher level critical thinking skills and express more nuanced emotional, moral and philosophical stances while also developing a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of the complex time period.

The game currently consists of three chapters, each set in a different week during the war: Chapter 2 focuses on whether to leave or stay in Paris as the Nazi Army approaches in June 1940; Chapter 3 focuses on rationing and is set in December 1940; Chapter 5 focuses on politics of engagement in August 1941. A total of twelve chapters set in 1939-1947 (postwar France) are planned. Chapters are currently independent of each other. Each consists of regular requirements (food, work, information) and special quests. Money is limited (based on average salary at the time). Safety/security (i.e. obeying the law) and health points can impact play; a chapter score determines win status at the end of the chapter. Multiple random elements, as well as choices during interactions, make the game unique to each player. Students are asked to keep a daily diary for their character, as well as a news journal (based on information gleaned during game play).

The pilot tests were based on Chapter 3 used in a History of Paris course in Spring 2014 (12 students) and Chapters 2, 3 & 5 in a course titled “Paris Occupé” in Spring 2015 (6 students). One student participated in both pilots. Courses last 10 weeks; each game chapter comprised about two weeks in the schedule.

Meaningful Context for Language Production

In a foreign language classroom focused on developing communicative competence– that is the ability to share ideas with others in the target language– context is key. In more traditional language learning modalities, context establishes the scope of vocabulary needed to accomplish a task or voice an idea (e.g. buying food at a market place or stating one’s preference for X over Y); it also helps to determine the kinds of grammatical structures necessary to appropriate delivery of the message (e.g. a command form to express authority or the conditional form used to reinforce politeness). Beyond the scope of mere vocabulary and grammar acquisition, context can provide important input (things one sees, hears, reads) that set the stage for communicative activities (stating one’s opinion, taking an action, making a request). Learners absorb the language that surrounds them (reception) and this helps prepare them to produce language on their own– much like young children take in language for a long time before they can produce full sentences, or even phrases, on their own.

The use of multimedia in all forms has allowed foreign language students to move beyond the walls of the classroom into more immersive environments where they can receive culturally-appropriate visual and audio stimuli. In the context of computer-based technologies, these immersive environments include, importantly, interactions which can range from the highly scripted interface of an avatar to “meeting” someone from the other culture via Skype. Even seemingly simple activities, such as choosing which objects to pack in a suitcase, can lend to discoveries (“Water only comes in glass bottles?”) or help to learn new vocabulary (“Oh, that’s what *bocale* means!”). But in the context of the game, each choice carries additional importance. Is it more important to pack water or bring a first aid kit? Should I bring family photos or an umbrella? The player knows that each object may have some additional value later in the game (e.g. family photos may help convince distant relatives to provide housing; water, though heavy, may be critical for survival).

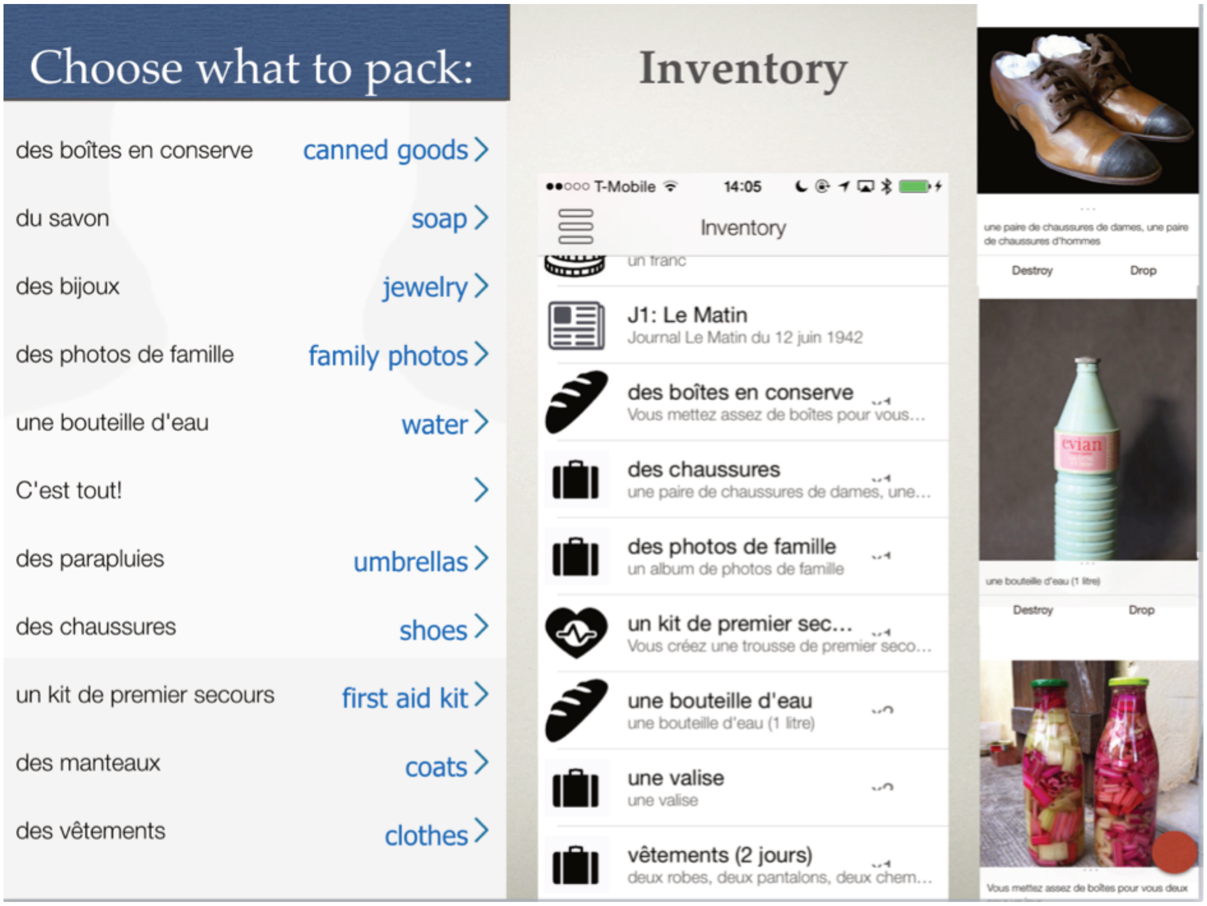

Figure 1. Players select from list (left). Items enter inventory (middle) where they can be examined; images and descriptions help players to understand meaning (right).

Over the course of the quarter, the instructor noticed the quantity of text generated by students in their daily journal assignments (one entry per "day" of the game required in their diary and another in their analysis of the news) and follow-up activities. Further analysis is needed by a linguist to determine whether the instructor's anecdotal observations of students incorporating game language into their personal vocabulary is, in fact, verifiable. However, in terms of pure volume of language, there appears to be a significant change. Consider, for example, the question "What was life like during the Occupation?" which was posed in both a pre- and post-game activity (i.e. April and June 2015). Table 1 shows that students produced not only more words but also more details and descriptions of life during the time period. One of the hallmarks that distinguishes between Intermediate and Advanced level writing proficiency is the ability to produce paragraphs that combine and link sentences (Advanced) as opposed to primarily sentence-level discourse (Intermediate) (ACTFL, 2012).

What was life like during the occupation? [Student texts in French are not edited for spelling, etc.]		
	April 2015	**June 2015**
Student A	*Je crois que la vie etait tres difficile.*	*La vie sous l'occupation est très difficile parce que on n'a pas beaucoup de securité depuis cette époque. On vit avec peur de mort ou de danger parce qu'il y a des bombardements et des polices partout. J'aurais absolument peur. On ne savait jamais si au jourd'hui il y aura assez de nourriture ou si on aura encore le travail. Avant la guerre, la vie est differente parce que on a la stabilité et pendant la guerre c'est seulement le chaos.*
	[Translation] I think that life was very difficult.	[Translation] Life under the Occupation was very difficult because it wasn't very safe during that time. One lived in fear of death or danger because there were bombings and police everywhere. I would have been very afraid. One didn't know if there would be enough food today or if one would have work. Before the war, life was different because there was stability and during the war it's absolute chaos.
Student B	*Je pense que tout le monde a marché sur des œufs. J'ai regardé un film sur cet époque et sur les film il y avait le rationement de nourriture, gens qui essaient cacher des enfants juifs. Il fut un temps qui fait peur, quelque chose peut arriver.*	*Pendant cette epoque il y avait la occupation et le couvrefur. Beaucoup de la nourriture a ete envoyer a l'allemange, et il n'y avait pas assez de nourriture pour les gens. Il y avait aussi le rationnement et fait tout plus dificile. La vie a cette epoque etait tres dificile pour tout, especialement our les juif qui ne peut pas travailler dans beaucoup de trvaille, comme professeur, avocat et des position dans le gouvernement. [Rest written in English.] There wasn't much to do during this time period as in the game, you only had certain activities you could participate in and even when you did there was a possibility you would get in trouble. There were also the two zones, but even then the French government would send polish jews to the German government.*
	[Translation] I think everyone walked on eggs[hells]. I saw a film about this time and in it there was food rationing, people who tried to hide Jewish children. It was a time that was scary, something [bad] could happen.	[Translation] During that period, there was the occupation and curfew. Lots of food was sent to Germany and there wasn't enough food for the [French] people. There was also rationing [and that made everything] more difficult. Life at that time was more difficult for all, especially the Jews who couldn't work as professors, lawyers or jobs in the government. …[see above]

Table 1. Example of increased language production.

Furthermore, the "important" nature of the historical context of this game with all of its ramifications– resistance or collaboration as the appropriate action for law-abiding citizens, intervention or a blind towards the persecution of minority groups (and the effects of the Holocaust), and the extensive use of public media campaigns to influence mindsets– sets the stage for linguistic development by the language learners by engaging them with the content in personally meaningful ways by both their agency within the game and by the freedom offered by role-playing whereby "bad" actions can be "blamed" on the fictional character rather than being representative of the player.

Historical Understanding

Role-play personalizes the experience while giving players both mandatory tasks and free choices. One element of choice is reflected in the "daily life" aspect of *Paris Occupé*: players must "s'informer" by choosing whether to read Nazi-endorsed French newspapers, find clandestine newspapers, listen to Nazi-censored Radio Paris or listen illicitly to the BBC–all choices with potential consequences. Wherever possible, great care was given to connect students to authentic documents–including newspapers, memoirs, autobiographies, films–to show how people faced these difficult choices and the consequences of those real-life decisions. After purchasing a newspaper from the news kiosk, players are provided with a link to the national library of France's website, *Gallica*, to view the newspaper from day. Similarly, players who choose to listen to Radio Paris are guided to a youTube video of a popular song from the time period and those who choose the BBC, after losing "Security Points" for breaking the law, may be guided to a BBC radio show from that day and time or a BBC news broadcast. The game format makes accessing these original resources more amenable to students by providing a game-based purpose, as opposed to a more traditional classroom activity where the same links are accessible but without the context of the game.

Role-play also allows players to experience the more mundane aspects of life rather than the viewing the war as the series of narrative highs and lows depicted in movies, documentaries or novels. In the chapter on Rationing, for example, students commented on the repetitive nature of having to "stand in line for food all the time." This chapter's game goal is to purchase food for a holiday meal with guests. Points are awarded for gathering more prized items (e.g. a turkey rather than rabbit, a Camembert rather than goat cheese) to "cook" a traditional Christmas dinner. To do so, players must secure their ration coupons from the *Mairie* (Town Hall), then visit different vendors to purchase food. As was the case in 1940, long lines and short supplies made it difficult for families to find enough to eat, even in these early days of Occupation. Many surprising things emerged in the post-mortem discussions. Students revealed that they had trouble "finding" the Black Market (they thought it was a place, not a type of transaction). They also discussed the problem of the lines. With some faculty guidance (the Socratic method still has a role in the contemporary university classroom!), they came to understand that the hardship posed by rationing was not merely in the shortages of food but also in all of the other factors associated with procuring food.

One of the most profound moments in the Spring 2015 course occurred after viewing the October 1940 chart listing the allocations for different members of society. Students understood why expectant mothers and toddlers would be allocated extra rations for dairy (milk) and why manual laborers were afforded extra calories on a daily basis. But when they saw that the elderly were allocated a mere 670 calories per day, one student exclaimed "They [the Nazi government] are killing off the old people!" The conversation quickly turned, of their own accord, to issues of food security in contemporary society. Students moved beyond the rote recitation of "we learn history so we don't replicate the mistakes of the past" to a more profound recognition of how we see links between past and current events.

In a follow-up activity, one student wrote (English translation provided here) "When there's famine, there's no place for education. In the absence of education, there is no progress. That leaves a country susceptible to economic downfall and also open to its enemies." Another student wrote in the course evaluation: "I learned about the harshness of the daily life of the average Parisian. It must have been extremely humiliating being rationed by some foreign force as well as being limited of liberties and the things one should be able to do. I think that it must have been especially hard for nursing mothers and fathers with children. The old must have died very rapidly. it is very sad that the occupied had to live that way." These connections between the past and the present, as well as the recognition of the relationships between governmental policies and people's lives are important.

Ethical Development

Young adulthood is a period when new choices, new opportunities and new possibilities emerge. College-age students are interested in the "Big Ideas". Beyond the epistemological growth described by William Perry in his study of Harvard students in the 1950s and 60s, and the subsequent re-toolings of his work (Perry 1968, 1969), whereby young adults move from a position where knowledge is viewed as authoritarian and fixed to a more relative stance where knowledge is viewed as created and positional, our students have high aspirations and ideals. They have an energy and passion to change the world, as is seen in the movements on college campuses throughout the U.S. encouraging change of one kind or another. This is a time of experimentation and challenging authority. Games can play into that while also providing a "safe space" where students, as players in a game, can take on a variety of roles and practice making both good and bad decisions in order to evaluate the outcomes. In a game, *dead* isn't really *dead* and bad can become good by restarting, rebooting and playing in a new way.

Teaching students about World War II usually means dealing with simplifications: students almost always declare that they would have been part of a resistance movement, that they would have fought back, that they wouldn't have let "this" happen (where "this" could be the round-up of the Jews, the execution of a resistant, a challenge to the Nazi authorities). For better or worse, film narratives, novels and documentaries can also feed into the perception that the people of France were weak and cowardly for not fighting back. Yet historians understand that things aren't always as simple as they may seem. Multiple factors contributed to how events unrolled. Trying to teach students to understand the complexity of the context– even when one is hopeful that their ultimate decision will be identical to their initial one– involves encouraging empathy. Endacott & Brooks (2013) define historical empathy as "the process of students' cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions. Historical empathy involves understanding how people from the past thought, felt, made decisions, acted, and faced consequences within a specific historical and social context." In other words, through a better understanding of the contexts of the past, students begin to see events through another lens or perspective.

In *Paris Occupé*, the role-playing aspect of the game reinforces a more nuanced and complex understanding of context. Although the game structures students' encounters with events both by the organization of chapters focused on particular aspects of life and by the curation of media (including propaganda), the game also progressively integrates multiple and competing viewpoints of life at that time. In the Chapter 5 (August 1941), game, some newspapers tout the advantages of joining a national volunteer force going to work in Germany at the same time as clandestine newspapers decry the execution of two young men who protested against the Nazis. The Vichy President, Philippe Pétain, launches his campaign calling for a "Révolution nationale" and encourages joining the Légion française to help fight "the enemy" alongside the German Army while student tracts call for increased resistance. Called upon to engage, players find it difficult to know which "side" others are on and what they believe in.

As one small measure of students developing ability to handle complexity was measured by routinely asking them the question “A friend asks you to hide him/her. What challenges does that pose? What do you decide to do? Why?” (the actual wording of the question varied slightly in each follow-up activity). As we see in Table 2, answers in the pre-game questionnaire (April) were generally “I’d help my friend” though, interestingly, one student just refused to answer demonstrating complete avoidance (“Hypotheticals give me a headache”). Post-game questionnaires show more detailed responses where students weigh the costs and challenges of making such a difficult decision. While one hopes that we will always make “the right choice,” having a better understanding of how difficult these choices can be and why the right answers aren’t always the easy ones, is both a demonstration of historical empathy but also an acknowledgement of complexity. It wasn’t easy to be a hero in the same way that it wasn’t easy at the time to know which path to follow.

A friend asks you to hide him/her. What challenges does that pose? What do you decide to do? Why?			
	April 2014 (Student in both pilots	April 2015	May 2015
Student C (Spring 2014 & 2015 pilots)	*Je cache mon ami, ce qu'ils faisaient au peuple était injuste et si je n'aide pas mon ami je serais comme ces gens injustes. Je risquerai ma vie, parce qu'ils avaient le meme condamnation pour ceux qui les aide.*	*J'aurai parlé avec mon ami et le demander si il n'avait pas un autre amis a qui le demander. Je l'aurai demandé ça parce que c'estait tres dangereux. Je considerai si j'ai une famille ou non. Ma vie et ça de ma famille était en risque.*	*Je voudrais aider, mais je ne sais pas si je l'aiderai. Ce serait considéré comme une trahison contre le gouvernement et aurait probablement signifier la mort. Bien que mon cœur serait brisé si je ne l'aide pas, je ne suis pas sûr que je le ferais.*
	I’d hide my friend, what they were doing to the people was unfair and if I didn’t hide my friend I’d be like those unjust people. I’d risk my life because [even though?] I’d be condemned in the same manner as others who helped.	I’d talk with my friend and ask if he didn’t have other friends who could help. I’d ask this because it’s very dangerous [to hide him/her]. I’d consider whether the person is in my family or not. My life and that of my family would be at risk.	I’d want to help but I don’t know if I would. It would be considered as treason and probably mean death. Even though my heart would be broken if I didn’t help [my friend], I’m not sure I would do it.
Student D (Spring 2015 pilotonly)		*Les hypothétiques me donnent mal à la tête. Nous ne savons vraiment pas ce que nous aurions fait alors dans ces circonstances.*	*Je voudrais permettre mes vrais amis de rester chez moi. Je dois être investi dans cette personne. Moi et ma famille risquent d'être emprisonnés ou tués pour aider cette personne. Nous pourrions le trouver difficile d'avoir assez à manger tout en se nourrissant une personne qui ne peut pas gagner de l'argent ou d'obtenir des cartes de rationnement. (à suivre...)*
		Hypotheticals give me a headache. We don’t really know what we’d do in those circumstances.	I’d like to allow my true friends to stay [at my home]. I must be invested in that person. I and my family risk imprisonment or death for helping that person. We would find it difficult to have enough to eat while feeding this person who could not earn money or obtain ration cards. (continues for 2 paragraphs)

Table 2. Do you help a friend hide from the authorities?

Conclusion

Through these two pilot projects, we see that the challenging, but meaningful, tasks of *Paris Occupé* succeed in a game format, where careful scaffolding combines linguistic support and structured activity sequences. The "important" context sets the stage for linguistic development in these intermediate to intermediate-high level language learners. The immersive environment creates reasons for students to creatively use language and learn history. The combination of historical information learned through more traditional course materials (fiction and nonfiction in various media) plus the personal, emotional engagement with their RPG character, help students engage in higher level critical thinking skills and express more nuanced emotional, moral and philosophical stances while also developing a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of this complex time period.

One student (who declared on the first day of class that she "hates history") responded to the question *How would you describe this course to a friend?* in the final course survey thusly: "This class is very focused and centered on France during the World War II. It goes beyond just scratching the surface of this time and really takes you to connect emotionally with the lives of people during this time. It goes in depth rather than breadth. I learned so much more in this class and this short amount of time in comparison to the various history classes I've taken in high school and my early years in college. At the end, I can see how everything connected with what I've learned outside of this class." It's moments like these, among all of the chaff that is inherent to teaching and learning, that keep faculty motivated and make all of the hours preparing and creating projects such as *Paris Occupé* worthwhile!

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