

Keynote Talk

Developing Intercultural Competence through Videogames

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Abstract

Effective intercultural collaboration requires intercultural competence. Intercultural competence involves awareness of the differences between cultures, knowledge about the beliefs, values, and practices of other cultures, and the skill to apply that knowledge effortlessly and effectively in interpersonal interactions. Acquiring intercultural competence can involve intensive study of the target culture, as well as immersion in social milieu of the target culture. Anyone who interacts regularly with people of other cultures can benefit from intercultural competence, but not everyone has the time and motivation to engage in lengthy cultural study, or the opportunity to immerse oneself in the other culture for extended periods.

The focus of this talk is on the role of learning technologies in promoting intercultural competence. We address the problem of intercultural competence by means of computer-based serious games designed to help learners quickly acquire job-related linguistic and cultural proficiency. Videogame technology is used to create virtual worlds populated by non-player characters that speak and understand the target language, and behave in accordance with the norms of the culture. Conversational artificial intelligence technology enables learners to engage in spoken conversations with the non-player characters. Learners must speak the target language, and behave in a culturally proficient manner, in order to succeed at the game.

We employ a Situated Cultural Methodology to identify and document the necessary cultural knowledge and skills, and organize them into curricula that serve as the basis for the game-based courses. Curriculum design focuses on the situations that learners are likely to encounter when interacting with people from the target culture, and tasks that they are likely to want to perform. This context provides a Cultural Lens that focuses curriculum development on the locations, socio-political factors, perspectives, and cultural practices that are most relevant to those situations and tasks. This approach results in courses that enable people to quickly acquire the intercultural skills that are most relevant to their particular needs. In the process they gain enhanced cultural awareness, which can support learners and motivate them to broaden and deepen their knowledge of the target culture.

Military personnel engaged in civil affairs and peacekeeping operations are making extensive use of Alelo courses prior to overseas deployments. They report that the linguistic and cultural competence that they gained from the courses had a significant impact on the effectiveness of their operations. For example, a US Marine unit recently reported that it completed a tour of duty in Iraq without a single combat casualty. It attributed its success to its enhanced ability to develop relationships and establish rapport with the local people.

We are currently developing a variety of other courses aimed at linguistic and cultural competence. *Encounters: Global Chinese* is an integrated course in Chinese language and culture, being developed in collaboration with Yale University Press and Chinese International Publishing Group. *Rez World*, developed in collaboration with Thornton Media, is designed to promote language and culture restoration among Native American tribes. A Web-based course for Voice of America is intended to provide VOA listeners worldwide with an opportunity to develop spoken English communication skills and develop a better understanding of American culture.

Categories & Subject Descriptors: H.5.1 (Artificial, augmented, and virtual realities), H.5.2 (Natural language, Training, help, and documentation, Voice I/O), I.2.7 (Discourse, Language parsing and understanding, Speech recognition and synthesis), I.6.5 (Modeling methodologies), J.1 (Education, Military), J.4 (Sociology), J.5 (Linguistics), K.3.1 (Distance learning), K.8.0 (Games)

General Terms: Human Factors

Bio

Dr. W. Lewis Johnson is co-founder, president, and chief scientist of Alelo Inc., a company dedicated to the development of technology-based learning products that promote intercultural communication skills. Prior to that he was Research Professor in computer science at the University of Southern California / Information Sciences Institute. Enabling better intercultural communication is his passion and life calling. Lewis received his A.B. in Linguistics from Princeton University, and his Ph.D. in Computer Science from Yale University. At one point or another Lewis has acquired at least some conversational proficiency in fifteen languages, and hopes to learn several more. Lewis divides his time between Los Angeles, California, and Kona, Hawaii.