

# Games and learning

The importance of cognitive and affective engagement during game play

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**Abstract**— Many researchers have posited different types of engagement, distinguishing between behavioral, cognitive and affective engagement. We think that game designers and learning researchers should examine all types of engagement using multiple methodologies as a means to understand what students are learning from educational games during game play. In this article, we present findings from a qualitative study (N = 30) that focuses on the importance of cognitive and affective engagement during game play with educational games. To do this, we used the game called Ferran Alsina. The GIE research group from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia created this game that would help also to develop learning competences skills. The game used the Catalan education curriculum to work on the learning competences of primary education skills. We discuss the implications of our findings with educational games and results for measuring engagement.

**Keywords**— Games; learning; engagement; cognitive engagement; affective engagement; game play; learning competences; primary education program

## I. INTRODUCTION (HEADING 1)

Researchers have pointed three types of engagement, distinguishing between behavioral, cognitive and affective engagement. In behavioral engagement, behaviors are observable and easily measurable, defined as school attendance, involvement in academic tasks, and the level of compliance with school-related norms [1]. The second one, cognitive engagement refers to a psychological investment in academic activities, skills in a subject matter and metacognition [2], and is referred to the emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement as fueling the will to learn and persistence in a task [3]. Finally, affective engagement encompasses emotional reactions to schooling, relationships with other actors in and related to, school, and feelings about the value of education [4]. In the last two types,

behaviors are not easily measurable. Research has documented links between students' beliefs about their academic competence, self-regulated learning, and achievement [5]. Research on games and learning also correlates aspects of engagement and children's attitude. Thanks to an educational game, a student is able to develop positive attitudes towards the content and may show a greater interest in it in other non-game activities [6]. The act of children playing is a pleasurable way of interacting with objects and their own ideas, so that playing with an object implies learning to understand how something works [7]. In addition, games are considered to be effective tools since they are action-based; motivational; accommodate multiple learning styles and skills and reinforce mastery skills [8].

In this article, we shall present findings from a qualitative study that focusses on the importance of cognitive and affective engagement during game play. We used the educational game called Ferran Alsina. The GIE research team from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia created this game that would help also to develop learning skills. The game used the Catalan education curriculum to work on primary education learning competences. In addition, we will discuss some qualitative methodologies, including think-aloud protocol, focus groups, and observation that can help to examine types of engagement during game play. Combining an understanding of student engagement and think-aloud data with game analytics is vital to creating high-quality games for learning. Given the nature of the project, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: How could the use of game elements help students' cognitive and affective engagement during game play?

RQ2: How could the use of methodologies as observation, think-aloud protocol and focus groups help us to focus on cognitive and affective engagement?



This article is structured thus: over the following sections we explain the theoretical framework the proposal is built on. We describe the method used to develop this experience and we also explain the game's theme, as well as the learning skills the students may develop using the Ferran Alsina educational game. In the subsequent sections we mention the analysis and findings obtained. Finally, we present our discussion and references.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. *Engagement and games*

For decades, authors such as James Paul Gee [9] have discussed the potential of games for learning, and the multidisciplinary nature of games is what helps motivate users. As mentioned by Boyle, Connolly, Hainey, and Boyle [10], engagement in games is related to a wide range of elements inherent in the games as well as to the attributes of players. In the early elementary grades, research on the psychological aspects of engagement has focused on children's attitude toward school and goal-orientation learning. Alexander, Entwisle and Horsey [11] found that teachers' ratings of first grades has focussed on children's interest and participation in the classroom: enthusiastic, happy or interested in various different circumstances. Ahlfeldt, Mehta, and Sellnow [12] suggested student's engagement is higher with more problem-based activities due to the fact that students may spend more time on a game than they would reading related material. In games, engagement is assumed to have the potential to increase learning gains. One way of framing the relationship between motivation, engagement, and learning is as persistent reengagement; where learners are characterized as those who typically opt to participate, choose challenging tasks, stay focused, and are committed to completing the task [13]. However, success could be dependent upon a number of situations, including learning support, context in which the game is used and students' feelings. The context will often influence these emotions and could include community-guided and socio-material participation, supported by sociocultural theories of learning and development [14], which highlight how learning and developmental processes are fundamentally connected to the social and cultural context. Player feelings and emotions are important in games, as these factors could determine whether a user will engage with games or not. If players have positive affect toward games, they will continue to play but if a user's affect is bleak or weak, they are likely to disengage from the game. Many theoretical frameworks also have helped further explain the psychological aspects, including emotions in games [10]. However, conclusive results require psychological aspects and learning characteristics to be considered, and require a deeper understanding of the intricate links between learning and game mechanics for engagement.

### B. *Learning Competences*

Any proposal of current educational action must be framed within the model of competences or skills, since this model rules of a good part of international educational systems,

including games. We are talking about a reference that has ended up transcending the current normative curricular design in Spain. The European Union established a series of recommendations that determine a frame of reference of general cross-subject competences that are attainable by any student. These recommendations underline the progressive character of life-long learning [15] in open and multiple contexts. Competences are therefore a concept that can be defined as a combination of knowledge, capacities and attitudes relevant to the context, framed within a project of personal and collective project. According to the OCDE, underlining critical abilities such as analysis, reasoning and communication must be efficiently carried out as problems appear, and are to be resolved and interpreted in a variety of areas [16].

## III. METHOD

The project lasted over 3 months, beginning in September 2015. 30 primary students from the Barcelona metropolitan area took part, 15 fifth graders and 15 sixth graders in a primary education program (ages 8-10). Via a game play session, basic game metrics, observation, think-aloud and focus groups, we obtained their experiences using games. Students worked with researchers for a 60-minute game play session and simultaneous think-aloud protocol. The students were randomly selected. The students played Ferran Alsina, a platform and puzzle-based game designed for 8-10 year-olds. During game play students were videotaped, as part of the think-aloud protocol. Think-aloud is a common method for game usability testing and also in the area of user experience. The basic objective is that users are asked to complete tasks with a tested system and verbalize their thoughts while working on this tasks. This method is embedded in a well-respected research paradigm focusing on people's cognitive processes while executing of a wide range of tasks [17] [18]. When students first logged into the game, they completed five levels. Students had not played the game previously, and were asked how they were thinking and feeling throughout game play and about the choices that they were making while playing. The assigned time was 1.5 hours with focus group. One researcher conducted a post-game play focus group. During the focus group, students mentioned their interest in topics related to history, geography, languages, manifestations of culture, technology, mathematics and games. During this time, the students were introduced to the game. Most of the students reported playing digital games but also board games. All of the students had access to computers, mobile devices, consoles, and the Internet outside of school. The students mentioned playing a huge variety of games genres: platform games, card games, strategy games, action-adventure games, race games, puzzles, RPG and simulation games. We found a wide range of responses with respect to how much time students spent playing games outside of school, with an average of 5 hours per week. Furthermore, the students mentioned playing educational games via their teachers' recommendation.

Puzzle-based games are mostly designed as single-player games and are the most frequent typology in game-based



learning. Platforms and puzzle games have simple mechanics, drawing on Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow [19]; they are easy and engaging enough and can be played for a few minutes at a time; they are also easily learnt [20]. Finally, students were selected based on the work of Comrey and Lee [21], who suggest a small group (1–99).

#### IV. DESCRIPTION OF THE GAME TESTED

##### A. Description and game level

This game was developed in September 2012 with the help of primary teachers via an Investigation-Action methodology and a co-creation process for the design of the game [22], with a subsequent usability test and study. The main thrust of the story is the industrialization of Catalonia, and the main character presents information about their historical context. Alsina was a technician in the textile industry and an economist and, politically, he was a defender of economic protectionism. The actions that the player must take are intuitive, and the narration provides instructions as to what the player has to do and how to do it. The player receives constant help via text or images that show what is happening in the game. In addition, this information shows possibilities for resolving difficulties. The game follows a platform-style structure, which has enjoyed great success amongst younger players according to analysis of existing games in the market. Preferences have been indicated for platform games as they help to contribute to psychomotor development, spatial orientation, attention direction and focusing, as well as response speed. The game's structure has 14 levels together with activities that make a linear story. Table 1.

Level	Name
1	The future. Year 3550
2	The Vapor Vell Factory. Year 1889
3	In Barcelona. Year 1889
4	Ballon trip around Catalonia. Year 1890
5	The Güell Industry Colony. Year 1912.
6	Trip by train. Year 1912.
7	The mines. Year 1912.
8	The mines. Year 1912.
9	Return by train. Year 1912.
10	Visiting a new factory. Year 1912.
11	Barcelona port. Year 1811.
12	Around Barcelona. Year 1912.
13	Trip around Catalonia. Year 1810.
14	Back to Barcelona. Year 1809.

Table 1. Ferran Alsina game levels

Game levels deals with a specific theme related to Alsina's life and surroundings, and is led by two characters: Luc Mercuri and his robot Yiru. Both come from the future and go back in time to the beginning of the 20th century. The player must watch a video before playing the game, which will act as an introduction to locate them in time in the story. Once the introduction has finished, the player will be able to complete the first three levels of the game, which become more and more difficult and also serve to explain the game dynamic. We have sought to simplify the experience by displaying the navigational structure, and have also tried to make the navigation intuitive. Figure 1.



Fig 1. Game Interface

In the first level, entitled 'The Future. Year 3550', the avatar will gain access not only to the game, but also to the menu that allows the player to go back to previous levels to improve their score. The avatar will discover renewable energy by comparing the kinds of energy found in the year 3550 with those used in 1889. In the second 19th-century level, the avatar discovers the main characteristics of the factory that Alsina managed, the so-called Vapor Vell (Old Steam Factory).



Fig 2. Level 2, The Vapor Vell Factory.

The third level speaks about the workers' worries about the mechanization of the factories, a factor that would make them lose their jobs. The avatar and their robot will visit Alsina's house, and will discover Watt's Regulator, which allowed the quantity of steam that reached the machines to be constant. In the next level, 'Balloon trip around Catalonia - Year 1890', the

avatar will take a trip to find out the impact of industrialization, and will visit the mining, salt and coal industries. The fifth level, set in the year 1912, will explain what Antoni Gaudí's Güell Industrial Colony looked like. The avatar travels to see this enclave, and has to find coal for the colony in order to take a train trip in level 6. In levels 7 and 8, they take a trip to the mines, and the avatar discovers how mining is done and the difficulties involved, and subsequently returns to Barcelona on the train in level 9. In the following level, the player can dabble in starting up a new factory, and must overcome the dangers of installing new machines. Level 11, set in 1811, allows the avatar to visit to the port of Barcelona, where they will meet an important researcher from the 19th century: Dr. Salvà. As the first Spanish scientist to combat smallpox with a vaccine, he will show the avatar how the disease spread in Barcelona at the time. In levels 12 and 13, in 1912, the player will visit geographically important places in Catalonia. Finally, the player returns to Barcelona in level 14 during 1809, where they must fight with some rabid activists that have set fire to the city's factories. The players can follow the story from the beginning, or can dive into a specific level to play them using passwords.

#### B. *Learning competences present in the game*

We can take advantage of the playability to work on various aspects of the curriculum that can be developed in the classroom. The content forms part of the game's rules, and so the dynamic consists of displaying content closely related to the learning competences of the Catalan Department of Education's curriculum. The game's basic competences are:

1) Audiovisual and linguistic communicative competence. The player must be able to understand historical and geographical information through reading in order to advance in the game. In parallel, they must be able to interpret the visual context on their screens.

2) Cultural competence. The fact that the player works on historical aspects helps the class to understand and critically evaluate different cultural and historical manifestations.

The methodological competences used here are:

1) Information processing and digital competence. The learning of digital technology skills and strategies is encouraged.

2) The competence of learning to learn. The game helps the class to learn technical skills by themselves and provides them with instruments to investigate and research knowledge.

Personal competences are:

1) The development of the game itself helps each student to autonomously gain the knowledge as they read and pass the levels.

Other concepts, procedures and attitudes considered specific to upper primary level that are developed in the activities are:

- Getting to know the character's social environment and understanding their historical context.
- Locating themselves in space, orientating themselves and moving around the maps. Using virtual spaces.
- Finding out the most relevant aspects of life in the 20th century, the Industrial Revolution, as well as conflicts and technological advances.
- Placing stages and facts of Catalan history in time with a chronological structure.
- In mathematics, recognising fractions as part of a unit. Calculations with fractions and proportions.
- In language, practising conversation interactively, comprehension of texts and critical ability to understand information received, and knowledge of other languages with a basic vocabulary.

## V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. *Game play session*

As an experiment, the game metrics that we used focused on: daily active users and sessions. In the first metric, we saw the number of unique users that start at least one session in the game. This metric doesn't provide much information; however, this simple measure is a useful starting point for as a snapshot in time. Any time any user opens the game counts as a session. The total number of sessions requires some context to be a number with any meaning. This metric can tell us about how engaged users are with the game. If students are coming back, it's safe to assume they enjoy the game. All the students took part in game play session.

The analysis of the think-aloud data focused on two main issues. In behavioral engagement, it seems, behaviors are observable and easily measurable, defined as attention paid to and involvement in academic tasks. With regard to academic tasks, two indicators were used: tasks completed successfully and time required to complete the tasks. These indicators were applied both per task and for the overall performance of the tasks. Affective engagement was defined as emotional reactions to activities, relationships with other students and feelings about the value of tasks. Cognitive engagement is not easily measurable, but it was defined as the psychological investment in activities, competence, and metacognition as fueling the will to learn and task persistence.

Combining understanding of student engagement and think-aloud data with game analytics is vital to creating highquality games for learning. Without an analysis of cognitive and affective engagement the study cannot be completed. If we used only game analytics we could misconstrue when learning does happen via game play. Furthermore, we miss out on the opportunity to understand why learning happens and at what moments during game play. Every task in the game be interpreted as evidence of learning if the user successfully



completed every level or if the user accidentally discovered the answer. However, we would not have known this without their thinking and how the user was engaged with the game. The table below shows the main gaming elements in Ferran Alsina that offer the possibilities of players being cognitively and emotionally engaged in gameplay. These key elements can create a dynamic experience and entertainment [23], and they must be fully incorporated into the learning activities in order to provide a sense of enjoyment and motivation for students.

Definition	Aspect	Element
These influence players' actions, reactions regarding gameplay, learning and their thoughts.	Objectives: levels, rules, choices, progress, boundaries, outcomes and adaptation. Activities: talking, understanding the situation, exploring, solving of puzzles.	<b>Motivational</b>
These provide players with opportunities for involvement-participation in activities.	Procedures, role-play, resources. Activities: solving dilemmas, overcoming obstacles.	<b>Interactive</b>
Elements that cause players' sense of enjoyment.	Challenges: goals, feedback, punishments, and control. Activities: play, immersion, story, history, characters, objects, fantasy, solving problems.	<b>Enjoyable</b>

Table 2. Ferran Alsina gaming elements

*B. Learning competences present in the game* We have shared our findings from the post-game play focus group, and in particular to do with game observation. Also, we look into the findings to draw the marked differences in student experience with Ferran Alsina. The responses may help us understand different facets of student engagement with the game: cognitive and affective engagement. Students reported a huge variety of feelings in relation to the game. In terms of cognitive engagement, they discussed likes. Students reported sympathy and one group of 15 students relished the action in the game, guiding a player character to jump between suspended platforms or over obstacles to cross their environment. The student controls the jumps to avoid letting their character fall to their death. Another group, with 9 students, reported appreciating the game because it helped them learn topics related to history, geography, languages, manifestations of culture, technology and mathematics. Seven students mentioned disliking the reading activities, considering that it would be better not to offer too many options. Although

automatic measures (game analytics) as time-on-task for every player could lead us to assume that students enjoy the game, without students' reasons for liking or disliking an educational game, we would not understand why they dislike the game and which conditions contribute to engagement. In terms of emotional responses, 13 students reported feeling positive emotions in response to the game, 7 students reported feeling frustrated while playing the game and 10 students reported feeling both emotions together. In addition to these, 7 students reported that frustration made them decide to continue the game until they got to the end. Understanding feelings associated with gameplay, and their justifications helps us to analyze actions and experiences in games. Over time, positive emotions and enjoyable feelings experienced while playing games will lead to positive attitudes and expectations of games which provide longer-lasting reasons or motives for playing. It also helps to make sense of different kinds of patterns. Motives for playing games provide an alternative perspective on engagement, involving appraisals of feelings experienced while playing games. Fifteen of them expressed a positive experience and they thought a game like this would help others to learn more about historical and geographical information about Catalonia, as well as other cultural and historical manifestations. Most of them (17) reported that playing the game helped them to understand the character's social environment and historical context, like in the classroom - let us not forget that the game is linked to the Catalan education curriculum. They also could see relevant aspects of life in the 20th century, the Industrial Revolution, conflicts and technological advances. Interestingly, many of them reported that they did not like history before playing the game. They also mentioned historical facts of Catalan history with a chronological structure. Most thought that if they continued to learn in this way they would like history even more than they already do. Most of them, in response to the question, "Would you like to learn more about mathematics in games like this?" the majority said "yes, in games like this." In mathematics, they learned to recognize fractions as part of a unit and they did calculations with fractions and proportions. A few students (2) did say that they preferred to learn via books or apps. This shows that some students position school learning and game learning differently, and so we have to take into account the theoretical paradigms from both learning and games research. In terms of learning competences in language, interactively practising conversation, understanding texts and a critical ability to understand information received, as well knowledge of basic vocabulary in other languages, most (17) reported that playing the game helped them to understand these texts and information.

### C. Discussion

As mentioned previously, the success of learning could depend upon a number of situations, including the context in which the game is used and students' feelings. The context will often influence emotions and could include community-guided participation. Therefore, students' emotions must be understood within the parameters of gameplay when we are



examining games. Player feelings and emotions are important as factors to determine whether a user will engage with games. It is therefore important to assess this via focus groups, but also with other methodologies as game metrics, observation, think-aloud protocol or video data, but in addition to the game play session. Without attention to cognition we risk losing valuable data that relate to a student's learning. From this study, it seems that the variety of cognitive and affective engagement is evident, considering gameplay analytics in conjunction with focus groups or after analysing the think-aloud protocol results. Also, post-gameplay focus groups showed the need to better understand the player's prior experiences, feelings, and beliefs about history, games and learning. In addition, this can help us to understand their willingness to play educational games and their in-game preferences. This drives home the point that we should consider multiple qualitative methodologies and game play experience analysis as student experiences are qualitative. Game metrics can exhibit strong patterns that suggest learning, but without a deeper understanding of the user's reasoning and affect of what happened during game play sessions, we cannot understand what happen with the learning outcomes and how are achieved.

In terms of our RQ1:

1. Gaming provides opportunities for players to have something to gain from the gameplay.
2. Games could help students to develop skills and knowledge to handle the learning experiences provided.
3. In educational games, engagement is related to students' cognitive and emotional involvement in gameplay.
4. Gaming elements becomes clearer and make students become engaged with gameplay. This was proven by users acting enthusiastically, understanding the content and achieving their goals.

About RQ2: The use of methodologies as observation, think-aloud protocol and focus groups could help us to focus cognitive and affective engagement.

## VI. CONCLUSION

There are no rules for gameplay experiences and to improve engagement. The impact of gameplay in terms of engagement depends on players' individual differences. Engagement, when it comes to learning, may be seen as a personal process. Therefore, considering gaming elements that influence the learning experience is decisive. Gaming activities must match students' game type preferences as well as their preferred mode of gameplay, their abilities and learning tasks. Challenges and conflicts must match students' abilities and knowledge, as they must provide equal opportunities and avoid causing frustration. These points will not ensure positive engagement; however, they may help the players to learn from the game elements that affect engagement and learning. By understanding how these elements influence engagement, we can offer better activities

and games. We need to pay attention to the vast array of elements and relevant factors to ensure maximum potential for engagement in games.

As future work, we propose following students' progress to show if games can truly maintain their impacts and outcomes over time. This is important as students may require more diversified knowledge and skills sets over time.

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