I. Video Game Literacy in the EFL Classroom

Digital games are a substantial part of life in the 21st century. Most young individuals today play games, have grown up playing games, socialize in and around games, have friends and family who play games, and even learn through games. Digital games have also invaded popular culture, as references to digital games can continually be found in pop songs, Hollywood films, popular television shows and even popular clothing. Even individuals who do not play digital games are affected by online websites, apps and programs which intentionally utilize game mechanics to introduce playfulness and engage customers. Digital games, and other forms of popular culture for that matter, are also a considerable source of English language contact for young people in Germany. Many digital games are in English and some allow players to interact with others in the game where English is commonly spoken. Online, gamer communities communicate with each other and produce media either to inform, entertain or even build friendships – also typically in English. Beyond aspects of language, games are also complex interactive systems which are, even if largely produced and consumed under the guise of entertainment, cultural carriers that not only present views on the world, but also ways of being in and interacting with it. Thus, they introduce young German players to foreign cultures as well as foreign languages. In fact, the popularity of digital games is so great that educators have for decades now attempted to use them to increase student engagement and improve learning. Some have brought learning games into the classroom while others have even tried to model classrooms and classroom interactions after digital games.

   The impact and relevance of digital games poses a great challenge for the EFL classroom. On the one hand, the opportunities to connect to the cultural, language and media aspects of games (as well as to the motivation of students) are broad yet, on the other hand, there is little precedence in German schools. On top of this, the real dangers of digital games (or, more precisely, of their unreflected use) and the general skepticism towards media in Germany in general create a shaky foundation for any game pedagogy to be built upon. A glaringly obvious starting point to deal with these challenges is to begin talking about games in the EFL classroom. Talking about games will quickly make clear that there is already a rich and lively discourse on games and that learners have rich game experiences to bring to the classroom. Engagement in this existing dis-

course, and connecting it to learners' experiences, will further illuminate that games themselves are texts (albeit highly complex interactive ones) which both are parts and products of larger cultural processes. Thus, classroom discourse can connect to game discourse, which in turn holds the potential to connect to cultural discourse on games.

This study takes a literacy approach to working with digital games because such an approach views participation in cultural discourse as one of the highest goals of education, and it sees critical and reflected participation in English (language) cultural discourse as one of the highest goals, if not the highest goal, of the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. The pedagogy of literacy, in a broad sense of the term, and as an initial and brief introduction to it, involves the targeted and systematic enabling of communication involving both the decoding and encoding of information in various 'languages' and media. In the context of the didactics of English as a foreign language, literacy can mean emphasizing and prioritizing English (and its affordances) amongst other forms of communication as a means of engaging in discourse.

As an existing concept, video game literacy (VGL) is largely underdeveloped and has been completely ignored as a concept for EFL teaching and learning. While other literacy concepts, like for instance for literature and film, have already been developed and established, this study on VGL must be seen as an initial endeavor to introduce video game literacy to foreign language didactics. The title "Developing Video Game Literacy" is not an attempt to undermine the research of this study nor the conceptual tools and concepts it offers in conclusion, but rather reflects a recognition of the incunabulate stages of a larger process which requires substantial further research at both the conceptual and empirical levels. It is an open call for further criticism, research and development. As such, this study invites teachers, future teachers, EFL researchers and materials developers to borrow the 'tools' it produces, adapt them when needed and, ultimately, engage in the overarching discourse of video game literacy in the EFL classroom.

The following study exists in three parts. *Part I* develops the concept of VGL for the EFL classroom. It starts by addressing two foundational concepts – *fremdsprachige Diskursfähigkeit* and *multiliteracies* – before moving on to specific affordances of VGL for the EFL context. *Part I* ends by presenting a tripartite discourse-based model of VGL. *Part II* looks at gamer discourse and its potential for linking learners to the cultural discourse on games in the classroom. Specifically, it addresses video game fan-comics as one form of gamer-discourse which holds potential for illustrating the roles and functions of gamer discourse in general. This work is necessary since there has been little to no research done

on the discourse of gamers and the functions that their literacy practices fulfill. In this study, a conceptual look at the structures and affordances of video game fan-comics is followed by an empirical analysis of a *World of Warcraft* fan-comics archive. Results show potentials, not only to link gamer discourse to the classroom but also to link gamer discourse to the discourse-based model of video game literacy. *Part III* presents the results of three case studies on classroom game discourse at the 10th grade level. As an explorative, qualitative research, the case studies reveal challenges that occur when game discourse is introduced in the classroom. Analyses of these challenges reveal not only their complexity, but also their origins and the interconnections of single challenges across multiple if not all dimensions of game discourse. Furthermore, analyses reveal ways in which these challenges can be treated as learning opportunities to establish, encourage and develop informed game discourse and VGL in the EFL classroom.

1 Two Foundational Concepts

This study takes a specific approach to VGL by embedding it first and foremost within the concept of multiliteracies. The multiliteracies approach takes the concept of literacy and expands it beyond reading and writing alphabetic text and applies it to other types of modes and other types of (and especially new and digital) media. This means that VGL is largely about understanding digital games and engaging in informed productive practices within and around games. However, this study takes a more specific approach to what is potentially a very broad concept, and defines VGL in terms which are applicable to the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Thus, utilizing the concept of *fremdsprachige Diskursfähigkeit*,[1] this study interprets video game literacy as ultimately supporting the participation in (foreign language) cultural discourse around digital games. In other words, and broadly speaking, VGL can be understood as the ability to interpret games, game experiences, and discourse 'artifacts' around games, in order to critically and constructively participate in the English language discourse on games. It is not about actually designing and coding games – though this could be included in this current conceptualization, albeit in other studies and projects. Chapter 1 begins by addressing the concept of *foreign language discourse ability* and how it relates to educational goals that extend beyond, yet also include the EFL classroom. Next, this chapter presents the concept of multiliteracies as a basis for this study's conceptualization of VGL. This conceptualization sees a direct connection between multiliteracies and *foreign language discourse ability*, which allows an embedding of video game literacy in the EFL classroom. Finally, this chapter addresses specific affordances that such a conceptualization of VGL can offer learners, the EFL classroom and higher level educational goals.

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1   From here on, the term *fremdsprachige Diskursfähigkeit* will be refered to as *foreign language discourse ability*.

1.1 Foreign Language Discourse Ability: EFL Educational Goals

An initial step towards conceptualizing VGL for this study is by linking it to the context of EFL didactics. This contextualization is important because, first, VGL as a multiliteracies project runs the risk of not being relevant enough for any single school subject and thus of being ignored by all. Furthermore, it also runs the risk of not being relevant enough for a subject like English as a foreign language which, at times, focuses heavily on language itself and less on the production of meaning through language and through participation in higher level cultural processes. VGL as a multiliteracies project thus focusses on the role of language as one form of literacy that is inherently and inextricably intertwined with larger processes and modalities of (foreign language) communication. The second reason for contextualizing VGL in EFL didactics is that a subject which focuses on foreign language learning, culture, and its related skills and competencies requires that its specific interests and goals sit at the core of any didactic measure. That is to say, approaches to VGL that are interested in embedding the concept into other subject fields may not necessarily put alphabetic (foreign) language and culture at its core and will naturally adapt the concept to serve the specific didactic and educational purpose(s) of that subject. This EFL-approach to VGL is therefore interested in the affordances for learning EFL, for developing relevant skills and competencies, as well as for developing (inter)cultural awareness, reflection and participation.

This study takes a particular interest in cultural aspects of digital games. Such a focus treats digital games (and their attendant cultural practices) as valid forms of cultural artifacts that are inherently complex and whose complexity allows for multiple points of connection for classroom purposes. Furthermore, it targets the potentials of EFL, not only for the linguistic articulation of thought, but also for the negotiation of meaning amongst individuals and, at a higher level, for (trans)cultural participation. Thus, this study places VGL as targeting Wolfgang Hallet's concept of *fremdsprachige Diskursfähigkeit*, which offers a connection between EFL didactics and larger (socio-cultural) educational goals. The following passages expand on the connection between such higher level educational goals and their implications for the EFL classroom by examining the meaning and role of discourse and the function and purpose of cultural participation. Finally, the role of the foreign language for discourse participation and its implications for an EFL-oriented model of VGL is presented.

Because the EFL classroom is often occupied with the mechanics of foreign language learning, it is easy to overlook that the ultimate goal of the subject is

to prepare students for society as a whole as well as for their future lives. In the context of developing German national educational standards, Klieme et al. state that the overall goal of education is,

> dass alle Heranwachsenden einer Generation, und zwar unabhängig von Herkunft und Geschlecht, dazu befähigt werden, in der selbständigen Teilhabe an Politik, Gesellschaft und Kultur und in der Gestaltung der eigenen Lebenswelt diesem Anspruch gemäss zu leben und als mündige Bürger selbstbestimmt zu handeln. (Klieme et al. 2009: 63)

Here Klieme et al. highlight two interrelated goals: the first is that education prepares students for autonomous participation in politics, society and culture, and the second is that education should enable students to create their own lifeworlds according to the challenge of cultural participation and to act as self-determined citizens. These educational goals are not, however, specific to the German context, but rather fit other cultural and national understandings of the role of education.

In fact, these goals and the democratic ideology which underlie them are not just present in the German national educational standards, but are also embedded in the larger efforts of Europe, specifically in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (cf. Heyworth 2004: 12–13). In turn, these European endeavors can be seen in terms of goals that extend globally. The New London Group, consisting of literacy scholars from the U.S., Great Britain and Australia, describes an almost identical set of educational goals,

> If it were possible to define generally the mission of education, it could be said that its fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life. Pedagogy is a teaching and learning relationship that creates the potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation. (The New London Group 2000: 9)

In this light, the EFL classroom appears to be embedded in a subject which targets specifically all of the aforementioned goals and not merely isolated aspects. The role of the EFL classroom, in other words, is not simply to prepare students for economic life, or futures in which they will undoubtedly have to speak English in work settings (also including economic transactions – like interpreting advertisements in determining which products to buy), or political lives, in which English serves as a lingua franca for both the affairs of the European Union and international, global affairs, or even community lives, in which more and more people are interacting in global online communities, or in which Eng-

lish language and cultural media play an increasing role in the socialization of (especially young) individuals (cf. Berns 2007; Berns et al. 2007). Rather, the goal of the EFLC is to prepare students for all such aspects of life, since they all reflect the reality of English in today's world and especially in the lifeworlds of students in Germany.

However, while it is doubtful that anyone rejects this overall educational goal, the challenge often comes from creating meaningful language learning scenarios and tasks in the EFL classroom that have direct relevance for the lifeworlds (present and future) of students. It is easy for educational institutions and especially for teachers to claim that all language learning, no matter how mechanical and repetitive, falls within the conceptualization of this goal. However, the concept of *foreign language discourse ability* serves as a medium through which educators can conceptualize multiple levels of hierarchized learning goals since it hints towards methods through which to achieve an explicit connection. According to Hallet, *foreign language discourse ability* is a "Bildungs- und Leitziel des Englischunterrichts" (2011: 54) and that, as such, it includes all other competency goals of educational theory (Hallet 2008b: 88). However, before an understanding of the role of this concept for EFL didactics can be reached, the meaning and function of discourse must first be addressed.

The concept of discourse holds the potential to connect everyday communication with larger cultural processes. In this regard, Hallet refers to the distinction between discourse with a "d" and with a "D", which relates to the different levels with which communicative acts interact with the making of meaning. While "d" discourse refers to a more bottom-up approach to interpreting and engaging in communication based on putting sentence-level utterances into larger coherent wholes (Hallet, 2008b: 29; cf. also Heyworth, 2004: 219–220 on this level as discourse competence), "D" discourse refers to a more top-down approach based on larger cultural processes – ways of being in the world, ways of acting as cultural agents, ways of accepting and/or challenging established and created structures of power (based off of Kramsch and Foucault, cf. Hallet 2008b: 81).

Integrating these two levels of discourse ("d" and "D") in the concept of *foreign language discourse ability* highlights two crucial aspects of discursive communication. First, it points out that all communicative acts involve (to various degrees) the rules of social, political, and cultural power, and thus reproduce and reinstate the realities those structures of power represent (cf. Hallet 2015b: 21)[2]

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2   Cf. also Strydom 2000 for an overview of cultural discourse and its role for the construction of reality and knowledge. Cf. Bonnet, Breidbach & Hallet 2002: 154 on (foreign) language learning and reality construction in the context of CLIL.

Second, due to the social semiotic nature of communication and especially of language, communicative acts are also an opportunity to critically reflect on, question, negate, build upon, or even *redesign* such rules of cultural power and, through this, ways of being in the world. Concerning all communicative acts, Hallet states,

> Wer eine sprachliche Äußerung tut, initiiert einen Diskurs, greift in einen Diskurs ein, hält ihn aufrecht oder entwickelt ihn weiter... Zu dieser diskursiven Partizipation gehört neben der kommunikativen auch eine metadiskursive Kompetenz, welche die Reflexion, Hinterfragung und Kritik von Diskursverläufen, -regeln oder –verhalten ermöglicht. (Hallet 2008b: 87)

It follows that discursive participants are "kulturelle Aktanten" – and, in the EFL classroom, that "Die Schülerinnen und Schüler nehmen als kulturelle Subjekte – mit Wertvorstellungen, Haltungen, Meinungen, Sinnstiftungen und so weiter – am Lern- und Unterrichtsprozess teil." (Hallet 2011: 56) In other words, when students communicate in a foreign language, and especially in response to cultural artifacts and authentic communicative acts, they also engage as intercultural actors. They do so not only by learning foreign ways of being in the world (with its concomitant systems of power and social, cultural and political rules), and not only by reflecting on their own culture and its dominant discourses, but also by constructing the very reality within their own lifeworlds.

Multiliteracies and *foreign language discourse ability* are not separate approaches. Both are underlined by a social semiotic approach to communication, and both target the empowerment of individuals to co-construct their own lifeworlds. The social semiotic approach views meaning-making as a contextualized social and cultural practice, instead of meaning being necessarily and statically embedded in language and reality itself. According to M.A.K. Halliday (Halliday 2014), the social semiotic approach to language focuses on communication as existing of three dimensions: the ideational, the textual, and the interpersonal. In simplified terms, this division suggests that communication starts with an idea or experience (ideational) that must be put into some material or communicable form (textual). Furthermore, all ideas and experiences are communicated interpersonally, since all ideas and communicative acts present representations of the self in the world (social and natural), as well as in terms of the communicative partner. Social semiotics, sharing strong similarities with Blumer's symbolic interactionism approach (cf. Blumer 1986: 2), suggests that meaning is then co-constructed and negotiated. This idea has serious ontological and epistemological implications, suggesting that social reality, or how people understand, value and interact with the natural world, themselves and others, does

not exist in and of itself, but is constructed by individuals and social groups (discussed further in various sections of this study). Thus, a social semiotic approach to literacy is based on the premise that social reality is the result of complex interactions between symbols and semiotic domains, context, and social groupings.[3]

However, the construction of reality has never been (and should not be seen as) an individual responsibility. It is most likely the first and most epic collective struggle that society and culture has ever engaged in. This means that the individual construction of reality is reliant on 'inherited' collective constructions of reality and is thus indebted to culture for that (cf., for example, Rousseau's 1963 "social contract"). Furthermore, reality has never been disconnected from the natural world, meaning that it is always reliant on some type of action to 'test' its validity as well as its ability to solve problems (both in terms of the social and natural world). In essence, humans are social creatures reliant on their cultural and technological heritage as well as on the help (and specialized knowledge) of others within any particular context. Thus action, based on any perceived understanding of reality, is always social and always also political.

If democracy is a dominant value of modern Western society, then it must find ways of balancing the freedom to create individual reality with the responsibility to respect inherited tools for reality construction as well as others who live in the world. Both are past and future oriented. In this context, freedom refers to the individual ability to construct (or co-construct) new reality. The construction of new reality is future oriented because it allows for progress and growth in society, and it is also past-oriented because past realities allow a 'base' understanding in which to create new ones. This is where responsibility comes in. Responsibility is past oriented since individuals inherit tools of interacting with and seeing the world through socially 'established' realities. This means new constructions of reality could not occur without existing ones. However, responsibility is also future oriented because individuals inherit imperfect, and often unjust, realities and have a responsibility to themselves and others to improve upon them.

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3 Social semiotics does not necessarily deny the existence of a natural world that is defined by certain learnable patterns and rules. Rather, it is likely that social reality can only capture a limited understanding within a likely infinitely vast source of 'meanings' – and that these socially 'captured' understandings always start from ideas and experiences, that they must be 'translated' into various types of 'texts' to be communicated, and that they are also always tied up in the social struggle for power and ways of valuing.

Here the concept of "designing social futures" as laid out by The New London Group (2000) and Cope and Kalantzis (2000), and picked up on and extended by Cope and Kalantzis (2009) provides a useful approach because it treats design as a process. The New London Group defines this process as first "available designs", or "the resources for design" that consist of "grammars of language" and "other semiotic systems" as well as "orders of discourse" (2000: 20). "Available designs", when taken up by individuals and groups, enter a process of "designing" in which "available designs" are re-presented and recontextualized (ibid.: 22). The result of "designing" is "the redesigned", an emergent and new meaning. This new meaning ("the redesigned"), following the social semiotic approach, has also the ability to create new selves and identities (ibid.: 23), and it becomes the resources for "available designs" in the future (ibid. 23). What this approach to literacy and communication emphasizes is the political role of agency. Too little agency on the part of any one individual or group can lead to their subjugation by others, while too much can lead to their domination of others. A social semiotic approach to design that is based on democratic principles of equality sees agency as a socially symbiotic relationship. It allows individuals the personal freedom of agency to improve their individual lives, but it also provides them with the agency for social responsibility to take part in collective action that produces the synergistic power to solve global problems. Thus, it can be said that action in today's world must also be 'designed' through participation in discourse. Because it is and must continue to be social, designed action is based on communication that is connected to the discourse surrounding the nature and context of the action.

This process of "design" describes the connection between the multiliteracies approach and *foreign language discourse ability*, since the ability to design meaning, and to construct reality in a socially responsible manner, begins in the participation of cultural discourse. The approach to VGL that has emerged in this discussion here recognizes that learners already have co-created realities through the construction of their own lifeworlds. It also recognizes that some students are adept at actively co-creating that reality while others, to varying degrees, are consumers of pre-fabricated lifeworlds designed by market systems. Since video games play a role in the lifeworlds of all students, a *foreign language discourse ability* approach to VGL looks first at connecting to the discourses that come from student lifeworlds before it attempts to reach a more complex, higher discourse level that exists in the cultural realm beyond their experience, ability and understanding. Thus, the *foreign language discourse ability* approach to VGL supports the idea that, in order for communication to be meaningful in the classroom, students must not only be subjects of language literacy processes and

tasks, but they must also be producers. This means that they cannot be simply expected to 'soak up' important information delivered by the teacher and classroom materials, but they must also bring meaning from outside of the classroom to connect to the inherent potential for meaning that the classroom is able to provide, and this meaning must also be developed further through the emerging classroom discourse.

In order for this to occur, educators and materials designers cannot simply expect students to understand the value of higher level, complex cultural discourse and communicate in meaningful ways through them. Rather, they must be aware of, knowledgeable of, and also respect the various lifeworlds of their students, and the various levels of discourses which make up those lifeworlds. This should not suggest that all discourses that pertain to the lifeworlds of students are appropriate for the EFL classroom, but rather that within those lifeworld discourses lies a potential to connect to higher level cultural discourses. By connecting to the lifeworlds of students, EFL classrooms can connect to the complex experiences students have with English language discourses and cultural practices, and classrooms can present students with tasks that move them into their zone of proximal development, specifically targeting their ability to participate in increasingly complex levels of cultural discourse. Figure 1 illustrates the embeddedness of students within their own lifeworlds and also shows how these are further embedded in a larger culture and society. By specifically targeting the influence of the surrounding culture (including global and English language culture) on the students' lifeworlds, EFL classrooms can work to increasingly expand those lifeworlds to include an ever-increasing complexity of cultural discourse participation and democratic action. Through this connection, classroom tasks which target VGL can not only allow communication and discourse participation which is meaningful within the students' lifeworlds, but also relevant for their lifeworlds as embedded within larger cultural and social processes.