Gaming Perspectives: Insights Into *Disco Elysium* as a Tool for EFL Learning

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Abstract: *The integration of video games into education has garnered attention for its potential to enhance learning experiences, particularly in fostering engagement and autonomous skill development. This qualitative study investigates EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' perceptions of using Disco Elysium, a narrative-driven role-playing game, as a supplementary tool for language learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, focusing on the experiences of EFL learners who engaged with the game's complex linguistic and narrative content. The findings reveal that participants perceive Disco Elysium as a unique and immersive learning medium, aiding in vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and critical thinking. However, challenges such as the game's advanced vocabulary, cultural references, and morally complex themes were also identified. By centering on learner perspectives, this study contributes to the limited research on the role of narrative-driven games in language learning. The results provide insights into how such games can be integrated into educational contexts to complement traditional EFL learning methods.*

Keywords: *English learning material, Vocabulary acquisition, Reading comprehension, Critical thinking.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Technological learning and teaching media have become a requirement for teachers and lecturers in the last decade especially after COVID-19 pandemic (Aprianto, Purwati, & Anam, 2020; Khan, Ali, & Alourani, 2022; Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023). Following these advancements RPGs popularity have been increasing making them some kind of phenomenon in pop culture (Winardy & Septiana, 2023). Experimental learning such as autonomous learning could gain advantage from these technological advancements – Role Playing Games (RPGs) in particular can encourage learning through diverse scenarios and immersion they can offer therefore, RPGs as learning media should be an effective autonomous learning fostering language acquisition outside conventional classroom while keeping learners out of the harm's way of dangerous activities ((Alrehaili & Al Osman, 2022; Chen & Wu, 2023; Toh & Kirschner, 2020)). These immersive games not limited to encourage players but also foster cognitive, emotional, and social benefits (e.g. increased attention, problem-solving skills, critical thinking and self-efficacy) (Ajay Kumar, Anirban Saha, & Sucharita Mishra, 2023; Ruiz-Ezquerro, 2021; Winardy & Septiana, 2023). One particular RPG that has captured significant interest is *Disco Elysium,* an award-winning narrative RPG renowned for its complex narration and vast variation of linguistic environment.

EFL student commonly have difficulties to motivate themselves on learning new language. While studies such as the National Literacy Trust (2023) indicate a decline in traditional reading engagement among young learners, schools even experience the decline of

student's academic achievements due to the difficulties, the potential for narrative-driven RPGs to reverse this trend through motivating (Rafiola, Setyosari, Radjah, & Ramli, 2020), story-rich experiences have not been fully explored. Despite that, learning is a constant process through a lifespan (Cronin-Golomb & Bauer, 2023). Reading approach and fostering self-efficacy have been shown to substantially enhance reading skills in EFL learners (Isaqjon Madolimovich, 2022). Game based learning provided by narration within RPGs are known to be a fun way to motivate student with (Noroozi, Dehghanzadeh, & Talaee, 2020; Páez-Quinde, Iza-Pazmiño, Morocho-Lara, & Hernández-Domínguez, 2022).

In spite of its potential to essentially affect EFL student's reading proficiency and vocabulary acquisition, there are limited number of studies provide empirical data on how RPGs can serve as autonomous learning tools (Hanghøj, Kabel, & Jensen, 2022; Kao, 2020; Komala & Rifai, 2021). Most existing studies on games especially video games or RPGs and language learning in this case focus on short-term interventions or games with less text-heavy content, leaving gap in exploring the long-term effects of narrative complexity and immersion in RPGs on EFL learners' reading proficiency. There is also limited exploration of learner autonomy in this context—how learners independently engage with and benefit from the linguistic input provided by such games outside the formal classroom setting.

Thus, this study seeks to fill a notable gap in the current body of research by exploring the effects of *Disco Elysium* as an autonomous language learning medium, with a particular focus on its impact on reading proficiency and vocabulary mastery among EFL learners. While previous studies have examined the general role of games in language learning, few have investigated how narrative-driven role-playing games (RPGs) with rich textual content can facilitate specific language skills. This research aims to address several key questions: Do EFL Students agree with the use of *Disco Elysium* as learning material? How do EFL students perceive the potential of *Disco Elysium* as an English learning material, and what specific features of the game contribute to its effectiveness in language learning? The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on the immersive and text-heavy nature of *Disco Elysium*, which offers a unique blend of narrative complexity and player agency. By examining these aspects, this study intends to provide valuable insights into the potential of narrative-driven RPGs to serve as effective, engaging, and autonomous tools for language acquisition, thereby broadening the scope of digital game-based language learning research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Narrative-Driven RPGs

Narrative-driven RPGs are distinct from other video game genres due to their focus on storytelling and player interaction with the game world through choices and character development. RPGs are inherently social and collaborative. Fine (1983) notes how players form structured groups with hierarchies and roles, like Dungeon Masters (DMs) who lead the game, and other players who follow specific character paths. This setup promotes cooperation, negotiation, and sometimes even conflict resolution. RPGs combine fantasy with structured rule systems that guide gameplay. Rules are crucial for maintaining the game's coherence and provide a framework for players' decisions, actions, and interactions within the story (Neuenschwander, 2008). Games like *Disco Elysium*, *The Witcher 3*, and *Dragon Age* present players with extensive written dialogue, character monologues, and in-game texts that offer opportunities for extensive reading. These texts are often complex and require players to infer meaning, interpret motives, and understand nuanced language.

Moreover, the language used in RPGs is often sophisticated, incorporating complex sentence structures, rare vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions. Players are challenged to understand and interpret this language within the context of the game's fictional world, which can improve their reading skills and expand their vocabulary. Distinct accent of certain characters also can become a challenge to comprehend the dialogues (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Hejná, 2023; Miao, Rose, & Hosseini, 2024). For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, in particular, these games can serve as an immersive language-learning tool, exposing them to contextualized, authentic language use (Hanghøj, Kabel, & Jensen, 2022). Games like *Disco Elysium*, with its philosophical undertones and complex themes, challenge players to think critically about social, political, and existential issues, often requiring players to analyse language and context deeply (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Hejná, 2023; Vnucko & Klimova, 2023). This mirrors higher-level reading skills, such as identifying main ideas, recognizing tone, and making inferences—skills that are essential for both academic success and real-world communication.

Relationship Between Video Games and Education

Studies exploring the relationship between digital games and language acquisition highlight the potential of narrative-driven RPGs to improve reading proficiency among EFL learners. Hanghøj, Kabel, & Jensen (2022) point out that game-based environments provide rich linguistic input, enhancing both reading and overall language skills. Furthermore, research showed that children who played the game improved in number line

estimation and reading competence, although there were no notable differences in digit comparison, letter knowledge, or math competence (Vanbecelaere, 2020). Additionally, research by Kao (2020) and Komala & Rifai (2021) shows that digital game-based learning tasks lead to significant improvements in grammar and language acquisition, particularly when games offer immersive, rewarding challenges.Additionally, research showed that gamified learning led to significant improvements in motivation and multisyllabic word reading, with higher engagement in gamified classes, though reading comprehension gains varied (Qiao, Chu, & Yeung,., 2022; Qiao, Chu, Shen, & Yeung, 2023;). Building on these findings, we can observe a growing consensus on the value of digital games in enhancing EFL learners' language abilities. Particularly in narrative-driven RPGs, players are immersed in complex storylines that require understanding nuanced language, context-based vocabulary, and detailed narrative structures, all of which promote reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. These environments, as noted by Chen & Wu (2021) and Zou, Huang, & Xie (2019) often mimic real-world learning processes, where learners acquire language through context-rich scenarios, rather than isolated vocabulary or grammar exercises. This contextualized learning appears to aid retention and recall, fostering more natural language acquisition.

Hanghøj, Kabel, & Jensen (2022) argue that the multimodal nature of game-based learning, where text, audio, and visual cues are intertwined, supports a more holistic approach to language learning. Through narrative and problem-solving tasks, players encounter and process language in various forms, solidifying both linguistic comprehension and application. For instance, dialogue-heavy RPGs require players to engage with diverse language registers and vocabulary, enhancing their exposure to both formal and colloquial expressions (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Hejná, 2023; Miao, Rose, & Hosseini, 2024).

In terms of motivation, digital games provide a highly engaging platform that incentivizes persistence and curiosity, which are essential for language acquisition. According to Gardner's (2019) socio-educational model, motivation is a critical factor in successful language learning, as it encourages consistent practice and an openness to new linguistic input. Gamified learning environments support this by offering instant feedback, rewards, and progression metrics that mirror a sense of achievement (Choi et al., 2020; Winardy & Septiana, 2023; Toh & Kirschner, 2023). Qiao, Chu, Shen, & Yeung, (2022, 2023) found that gamified tasks significantly improved student engagement, particularly in multisyllabic word reading, a skill critical for both vocabulary and comprehension growth.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that narrative-driven RPGs and gamified learning environments offer a promising, though complex, avenue for enhancing language proficiency among EFL learners. Their effectiveness, however, may be maximized when combined with targeted instructional methods that support deeper comprehension and grammar application. Further research exploring the specific game mechanics that contribute most significantly to language skills, as well as studies on long-term retention, would help illuminate the full potential of digital games in language acquisition.

3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore EFL learners' perceptions of using *Disco Elysium* as an educational tool. The approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences, thoughts, and attitudes towards the game's potential for language learning. By focusing on subjective experiences, the research aimed to uncover nuanced insights that may not emerge through quantitative methods. The study recruited 10 EFL university learners from an intermediate to advanced proficiency level, ensuring that they had the linguistic capability to engage meaningfully with the game's complex language. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, prioritizing individuals who expressed interest in narrative-driven games or had prior exposure to similar digital media.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted in person and online. This method provided flexibility to probe deeper into participants' responses and allowed them to elaborate on their first impression of the game. Additional data were collected through reflective journals, in which participants documented their gameplay impressions and noted any language learning moments they encountered.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data. The process involved coding interview transcripts and journal entries to uncover recurring perceptions, challenges, and opportunities linked to *Disco Elysium*. Coding was conducted in iterative stages to ensure the reliability and richness of the findings. Key themes, such as vocabulary acquisition, cultural immersion, and critical thinking, were identified and analyzed in relation to participants' overall learning experiences.

The study adhered to ethical research practices, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring anonymity, and allowing participants to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Data were securely stored, and all findings were reported in a way that preserved participant confidentiality. This methical approach enabled the study to capture

the complexities of learners' perceptions and provided valuable insights into the role of narrative-driven video games in EFL education.

4. RESULTS

Disco Elysium's Potential as a Learning Material

The findings from the interviews reveal that 8 out of 10 students perceive *Disco Elysium* as a game with significant potential to serve as an English learning material. Participants highlighted the game's rich narrative, complex dialogues, and immersive storytelling as key factors that could enhance language learning. One of the Student Expressed:

"Menurutku, Disco Elysium punya potensi besar buat jadi bahan belajar Bahasa Inggris, terutama buat pembelajar tingkat lanjut. Dialognya kaya akan kosakata, idiom, dan topik mendalam seperti politik dan filosofi. Lewat pilihan dialog, kita bisa belajar membaca, memahami konteks, dan melatih cara bicara yang lebih natural. Tapi, karena ada beberapa konten dewasa, penggunaannya perlu disesuaikan." "In my opinion, *Disco Elysium* has great potential to be used as English learning material, especially for advanced learners. Its dialogues are rich in vocabulary, idioms, and deep topics such as politics and philosophy. Through dialogue choices, players can practice reading, understanding context, and developing more natural speaking skills. However, since the game contains some mature content, its use would need to be adapted accordingly."

"Ini karena disco elysium memiliki elemen thought cabinet. Ini membuat disco elysium memiliki pontesi yang memungkinkan, dengan membuat para pembelajar untuk berpikir kritis, terlebih lagi sang MC merupakan seorang detektif. Ini membuat alur dialog dari game ini membuatnya menjadi berat dan harus memaksa kemampuan kognitif untuk berpikir lebih keras dari sebelumnya dalam menerima informasi di sekitar dan para pembelajar juga dapat menganalisis dan berpikir lebih matang sebelum memngambil keputusan. Namun, sebelum itu, perlu untuk pemateri mengatur perencanaan dan adaptasi yang matang untuk membaut pembelajar dapat menerima benefit yang optimal selama proses belajar dan mengajar berlangsung" This is because *Disco Elysium* has a *Thought Cabinet* element. This feature gives *Disco Elysium* the potential to encourage learners to think critically, especially since the main character is a detective. This makes the game's dialogue flow complex, forcing cognitive abilities to work harder than before in processing information from the surroundings. Additionally, learners can analyze and think more carefully before

making decisions. However, it is essential for educators to plan and adapt thoroughly to ensure that learners can gain optimal benefits during the teaching and learning process."

They noted that the game's extensive use of advanced vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and contextualized language provides valuable exposure to authentic English usage. Additionally, students appreciated the critical thinking and moral decision-making elements embedded in the gameplay, which they believe encourage deeper engagement with the language. The *Thought Cabinet* in *Disco Elysium* is highlighted as a key feature that facilitates critical thinking and deep analysis, making it a unique educational tool. The role of the main character as a detective aligns with problem-solving and decision-making processes, which are integral to both language learning and cognitive development. The game challenges players to process and interpret complex dialogues and narrative elements, potentially improving comprehension, analytical skills, and the ability to make well-informed decisions. Despite acknowledging its linguistic complexity, many students viewed this challenge as an opportunity to expand their vocabulary and improve reading comprehension in a meaningful, engaging context. Hence the minority of the students disagree for using *Disco Elysium* as learning material. Overall, the students expressed enthusiasm for integrating games like *Disco Elysium* into educational settings, emphasizing their potential to complement traditional language learning methods.

Furthermore, most of the students perceived video games as an enjoyable and engaging way to learn English. They emphasized that since the primary purpose of video games is to entertain, integrating language learning into gameplay provides a unique opportunity to combine fun with education. This dual purpose allows players to immerse themselves in enjoyable experiences while simultaneously acquiring new vocabulary, improving reading comprehension, and developing contextual understanding in English. Students also noted that learning through video games feels less formal and intimidating compared to traditional methods, making it a more appealing and effective option for enhancing language skills.

Students' Perceptions of *Disco Elysium* as a Language Learning Tool

The majority of students interviewed expressed a willingness to play *Disco Elysium* for educational purposes, highlighting its unique combination of storytelling, dialogue, and decision-making as features that could enhance their English learning experience. One student remarked on the game's potential to expand vocabulary and deepen contextual understanding, emphasizing the value of engaging with its intricate narrative and morally complex decision-making mechanics. One of them stated:

"Jujur, kalau ada kesempatan, aku mau banget coba main *Disco Elysium* buat belajar. Dari yang aku tahu, game ini punya cerita yang kuat dan dialog yang mendalam. Aku rasa, itu bakal bantu aku memperluas kosakata dan memahami konteks dalam Bahasa Inggris. Apalagi ada elemen keputusan di game ini, jadi kayaknya seru banget buat melatih cara berpikir sekaligus belajar Bahasa Inggris." "To be honest, I really want to try playing *Disco Elysium* for studying if I had the chance. From what I know, this game has a strong storyline and deep dialogues. I think it would help me expand my vocabulary and understand context in English. Moreover, it has decision-making elements, so it seems like it would be really exciting to train my thinking skills while learning English at the same time."

This response reflects a broader trend among the participants, who view *Disco Elysium* not only as a source of entertainment but also as a tool for meaningful language acquisition. The game's narrative depth and dialogic interactions were frequently cited as opportunities for improving vocabulary and comprehension. Furthermore, students recognized the game's capacity to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which they associated with real-world applications of language use. These findings suggest that the students see value in integrating narrative-driven RPGs into their learning processes, perceiving them as both intellectually stimulating and linguistically beneficial. However, this enthusiasm also implies the need for guidance to navigate the game's linguistic and thematic complexity, ensuring its educational potential is fully realized.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings from the interviews, along with the analysis of *Disco Elysium*'s unique features, reveal a strong potential for using the game as a tool for English language learning, particularly for advanced learners. The game's complex narrative structure, dialogue, and decision-making mechanics offer several valuable opportunities for cognitive and linguistic development. The inclusion of the *Thought Cabinet*, a feature that encourages critical thinking, is particularly significant as it promotes deeper engagement with the game's content. Learners are prompted to not only process complex language but also evaluate information, analyze situations, and make thoughtful decisions—skills that are transferable to real-world scenarios and essential for effective communication in English.

One of the main strengths of *Disco Elysium* as an educational tool lies in its ability to immerse players in a world where language and thought are integral to the gameplay. The game's dialogue is rich in vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and contextual language, making

it an excellent resource for expanding learners' linguistic abilities. For instance, players are constantly exposed to both formal and informal language, which reflects the nuances of real-world English. Furthermore, the game's emphasis on decision-making and moral dilemmas challenges players to consider the consequences of their choices, enhancing their ability to analyze situations critically and communicate more effectively.

However, despite these benefits, the complexity of the game's language and themes cannot be overlooked. As one of the students pointed out, the game requires cognitive effort to fully understand and process the dialogues, which might pose a challenge for some learners. This complexity, while valuable in fostering higher-order thinking, could also overwhelm beginners or even intermediate learners. Therefore, it is essential for educators to carefully plan and adapt their approach when incorporating *Disco Elysium* into the curriculum. This includes providing scaffolding, such as vocabulary lists, guided discussions, or pre-game tutorials, to help students navigate the game's linguistic and thematic challenges.

Moreover, the mature content within *Disco Elysium* requires thoughtful consideration. While the game's mature themes provide rich opportunities for exploring complex societal and philosophical topics, they may not be suitable for all learners, especially those who are still developing their language skills. Educators need to ensure that students are mature enough to handle these themes and that the content aligns with the learners' educational goals. In some cases, it may be beneficial to offer alternative versions of the game or to provide content warnings to prepare learners for what to expect.

Incorporating *Disco Elysium* into language learning also calls for a shift in how educators approach language acquisition. Traditional language learning methods often focus on rote memorization and grammar rules, but *Disco Elysium* challenges this model by fostering experiential learning through interaction and immersion. This approach aligns with modern educational theories, such as constructivism, which emphasize active engagement and the application of knowledge in meaningful contexts (Erbil, 2020; Zaky & Al Mulhim, 2024). Through its narrative-driven structure and immersive world, *Disco Elysium* allows learners to practice their language skills in realistic and contextually rich scenarios, providing a more dynamic and engaging learning experience.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Disco Elysium* presents a unique opportunity to enhance English language learning, particularly for advanced learners. Its narrative depth, critical thinking elements, and rich dialogue make it an ideal tool for fostering vocabulary acquisition,

comprehension, and decision-making skills. However, for optimal learning outcomes, educators must carefully plan and adapt their approach to ensure that learners can navigate the game's complexities and benefit from its educational potential. By considering the learners' proficiency level, providing adequate support, and addressing content appropriateness, *Disco Elysium* can be effectively integrated into English language education, offering a novel and engaging way to learn.

LIMITATION

This research, while providing valuable insights into the perceptions of EFL learners regarding *Disco Elysium* as an educational tool, has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size and demographics may limit the generalizability of the findings. The study focused on a small group of students, and their responses may not fully represent the broader population of EFL learners, particularly those with less interest in video games. Additionally, the self-reported data collected from interviews introduces the risk of bias, as participants might provide socially desirable responses or be influenced by their prior knowledge of the game rather than actual experience. Furthermore, the study did not incorporate a longitudinal perspective, meaning it only captured initial perceptions of the game's potential, without exploring how these perceptions might evolve over time or with sustained exposure to the game.

Another limitation is the variability in participants' language proficiency, which could have impacted their engagement with the game. *Disco Elysium* contains complex language, and learners with varying levels of proficiency may experience the game differently, potentially affecting their overall perception of its educational value. Moreover, the study primarily focused on the game's narrative and dialogue features, neglecting other aspects like visual design, music, or environmental storytelling, which might also influence the learning experience. Additionally, the game's mature content presents ethical considerations, as themes such as violence, substance abuse, and mental health may not be suitable for all learners, especially those who are younger or more sensitive. While the study acknowledged the need for adaptation in educational settings, it did not explore how educators could manage such content effectively.

The research also did not account for cultural and contextual factors that might affect learners' engagement with *Disco Elysium*. Given the game's Western cultural influences, students from different backgrounds may interpret its themes differently, which could affect their learning experience. Lastly, technical limitations, such as access to the game and the necessary hardware, may hinder some learners from fully benefiting from it as a learning tool.

These factors suggest that while the findings are insightful, further research is needed to explore the broader applicability and effectiveness of *Disco Elysium* in diverse educational contexts.

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