Faculty First Grant Report - 2015

La Lettre
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Project Overview and Course Overview

This project is a placed-based mobile language-learning platform in which students play the role of private investigators that will help two virtual French siblings to discover the secret of their family's descendants. They will follow a series of scavenger-hunt-like activities, and, while doing so, learn about the French historical influence in Knoxville from the 18th century to the present while improving their French skills.
The platform is built on current research in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and, more specifically, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and will be deployed in the 200- level and upper division French courses at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Semesters the course has been and/or will be taught

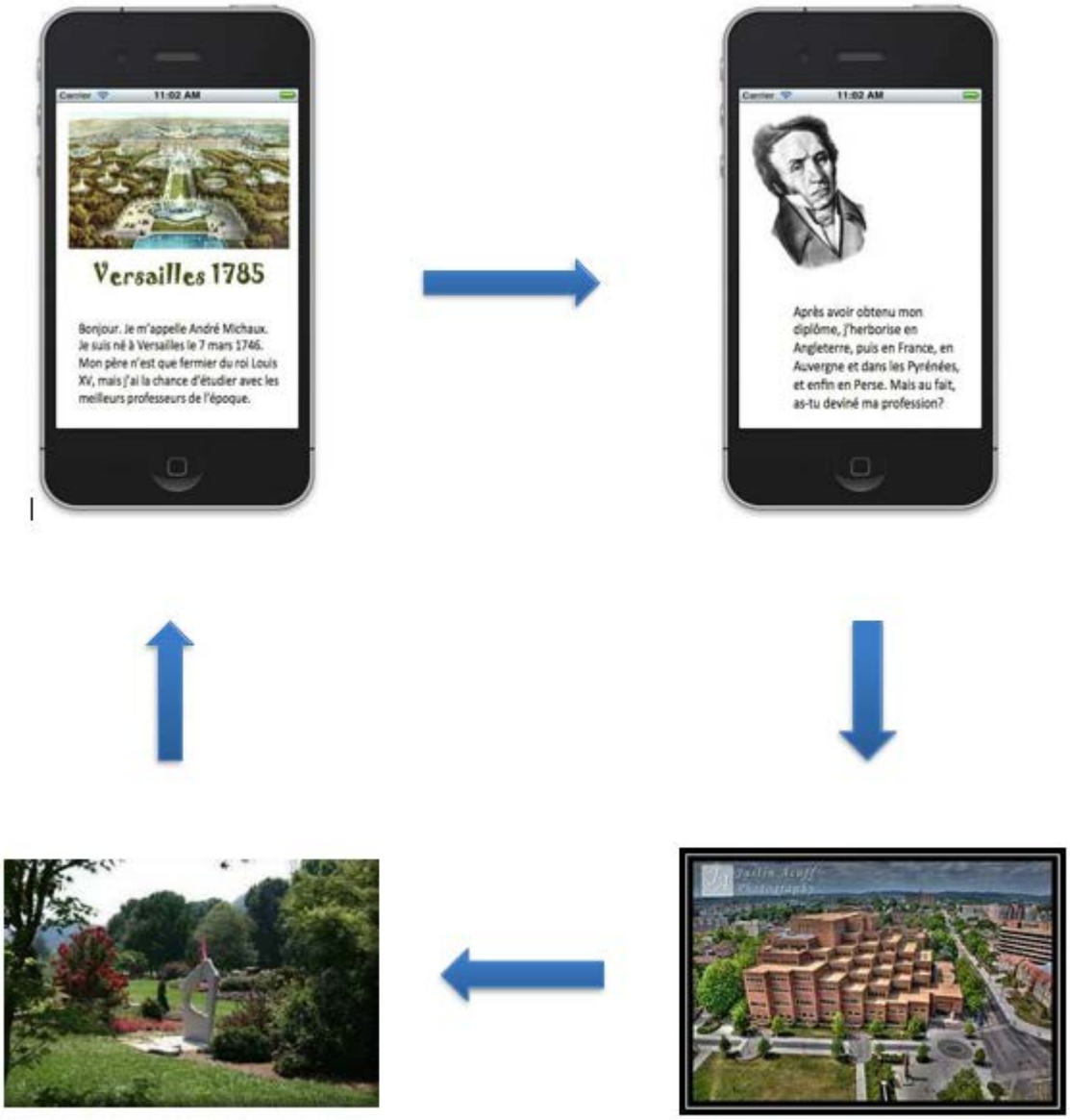
The materials (chapter 1) will be tested in Spring 2016 in three 212 classes, and one 334 class (intermediate conversation). Student-players will be regularly assigned tasks from the platform, and will have to complete their search by the end of the semester.
The other chapters (2, 3, and 4) will be developed, and tested during spring and summer 2016, and will be implemented in Fall 2016 in 200-level French courses.

Number of students affected

About 600 students are enrolled in French 200 levels each year (based on Fall 2015, and Spring 2016 registration). Although it seems currently a little premature to evaluate the real impact of such material on enrollment, I estimate that this kind of digital game format usable on a mobile device, and operating a problem-solving mystery, should keep students highly motivated; hopefully, by word of mouth, students will know about this tool and become interested in following French studies. In time we will have more data.

Project outcomes and products

This project is built under the platform Aris, which uses GPS and QR codes to create a hybrid world of virtual interactive characters, items and media placed in physical space. Players use their iPad or iPhone to access the platform www.arisgames.org, and dive into local exploration, practice, language production, and collaboration to resolve enigmas.
In chapter 1, for instance, the story starts in Versailles (France), where players meet a virtual botanist, André Michaux, who leads them to Knoxville to explore UT Hodges library to find old manuscripts, and the UT botanical garden to retrieve important species that the botanist introduced to the US (see below). The quest combines historical facts, and actual reality.



Caption: The figures above show where Chapter 1 begins in Versailles, 1785. It then moves on to the introduction of Andre Michaux, Hodges Library in Knoxville, and the botanical gardens.

The platform is entirely in French and includes readings, listening comprehension, videos, and music that players need to analyze, understand, and use in order to proceed from one step to the next to resolve 4 enigmas, one for each last century. Players experience successively major events that happened in Knoxville, namely the post French Indian War period (1754-63), the Civil War (battle of Fort Sanders in 1863), the World Fair (1982), and the 50th anniversary of the Alliance Française (2009).

The end of each chapter uncovers a part of a mysterious letter that players must complete to discover the secret of the French siblings family's descendants.

You can download Aris to your device, register to the free platform, and play the game *La Lettre*.

Student Evaluation

A specific project evaluation will be developed in Fall 2016.
A brief testing with groups of 3 students of 211 was established in Fall 2015. The feedback received demonstrates that:

- Students think that resolving enigmas makes learning fun.
- They understand the platform functions, and are able to navigate freely.
- They collaborate to make meaning.
- They find the content informative.
- They enjoy the interactive and independent environment.
- They would like more time to continue the game.
- Some can make connections with the content learned in class. A detailed assessment plan will be completed in summer 2016.

Project benefits for the department and UT

This project offers diversity to the French program, and to the university by providing a self- teaching material open to different leaning styles. It works to extend the community of learners beyond the walls of the classroom to engage students in a "real-life" learning task that will foster collaborative language learning in a culturally relevant context. Indeed, students will need to use the knowledge they have acquired in class while getting the opportunity to be immersed in a cross-cultural dimension where their perspicacity and communicative competencies will interact to solve the mystery.

The platform is first designed for 211(intermediate 3d semester), 212 (intermediate 4th semester), and 223 (intensive intermediate) classes, but it could be expanded for application in upper level French classes to expose students to cross-cultural and interdisciplinary knowledge. Moreover, as the French program has already started to examine effective uses of instructional technologies to foster culture learning and language development, an empirical study will be designed to collect and analyze data pertaining to learner attitude and perception vis-à-vis the game as well as learning outcomes. This study will provide further insights on the impact of gaming on language learning.

Finally, this project offers the opportunity to students to experience the real world as they will interact not only with simulated characters, but also with the local French community in Knoxville, develop connections, and appreciate the usefulness of language learning in context.

Conclusion

The main goal of this project is to elicit meaningful interaction in French, develop critical thinking, and trigger interests. The platform is designed accordingly, and players should be stimulated to enjoy the experience while learning about the place they live in.

I am grateful to OIT, first by participating in the Summer Teaching Institute, which allowed me to better identify active learning techniques associated with technology, and refine the learning objectives of my project. Once the project was underway, collaborating with OIT gave me the opportunity to obtain technical support, expertise in design, and multimedia development, which were key elements in the conception of this platform that requires a great amount of technical expertise.

The only constraining factor was time related because of my teaching responsibilities, and keeping the team involved in the conception and on schedule.

Finally, I hope that this project will incite future developments of gaming in language learning. I think that designing a new class that will let students develop the next sequel of the platform *La Lettre* will develop a dynamic learning environment, anticipate the changing needs of students, and prepare them better for the workplace.