



# Adventures in Language Learning



## Gamifying French Immersion

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*The adventurers hold their breath inside the cave. In the flickering light of the torch, the elf's face appears contorted with the mental effort. "Cinq mille ... deux cent ... quatre-vingt dix sept!" she finally cries.*

*Click! The enchanted chest slowly opens, revealing a pile of dusty tomes written in the ancient language of the Immer-Sion people.*

*"Let me guess," an orc groans. "The secret spell is in one of those?"*

*"All the Witch said is that it starts with "Nous devrions" and ends with "la pluie."*

*"Well," a giant says grabbing one of the books. "We better start reading before the guards find us."*

I have taught French at all levels for 17 years, in the UK and Canada, from high school to early French immersion to Teacher candidates. Like my students, I have experienced first-hand that learning a language is a lifelong adventure, a transformative journey. It has the potential to be exciting, personal, fulfilling and well, immersive. Every day I borrow elements and mechanics from roleplaying, video and board games to build a game-informed framework that helps me create contextualised, quest-based French immersion learning environments for my students. Let's have a quick look at what games can teach us, before I share some of my favourite activities.

Ask your child to choose between an hour playing their favourite game, or another sheet of math questions. One is clearly perceived as a reward, the other one as something they would rather avoid. Often, we see play as the opposite of work, an easy way out. But every game is by definition a challenge, with constraints and rules, things you must and cannot do, and potential for success and failure. Spend 10 minutes watching any serious gamer getting "in the zone" and you'll find that play can in fact be incredibly hard work, from spending hours reading tutorials and guides to attempting the same level dozens of times until you finally get the three stars. It involves research, careful planning, resilience, and rigorous execution in the face of multiple

failure. YouTube and TikTok are full of viral "trick shot" videos, like bottle flips or blindfolded half court basketball shots, that take literally hours to perform. It is clear then that school-aged children and teenagers do in fact recognize the value of hard work. There is no rest for the gamer generation. The true reward of success is a chance at the next level, a bigger and badder final boss, a more ridiculously impossible trick shot – more work. So why won't kids do that in school? How can we harness that power and redirect some of that strong work ethic towards academic schoolwork?

The main difference lies in the purpose. Whether we're doing it for the views, the high score, the 100% achievement trophy, or for bragging rights, games give us an unparalleled sense of accomplishment that is, for most students, hard to replicate with school work. We've won the race, saved the world, built something. We feel blissfully productive. Guess the word I'm thinking – boring; hangman – there's a life at stake here! In games, especially computer games, the feedback loop between action and consequence is extremely short and so we immediately see the result of our actions. If I fall in the lava because I jumped too early, well now I know how to fix that. The brain gets its instant reward, which is what makes video games especially addictive. The hard to impress, Gen Z students need both success and

failure to be "totally epic." I want to see high fives, classmates erupting in cheers, students beaming with pride at what they have accomplished.

And here is why I believe French immersion is ideally suited to implementing a game-informed approach. Think about it. The French immersion classroom is already a made-up fantasy, a foreign game environment, bound by some arbitrary rules we all agree to. Within these walls we will all communicate in French, just like we all use the Common Speech in a Dungeons and Dragons campaign. Literally every word we say and hear is part of the learning, a task, a puzzle. Why not go all in, create an enticing overarching narrative and transport students to an exciting place brimming with challenges and exciting rewards, like in my opening example, where they get to use the language to achieve something that is meaningful to them? Maybe we've been cursed by the evil Ouizard. Maybe we're trapped in the Immersion Dimension and only have 186 days to fulfill a series of challenges or be trapped here forever. Now you have a story, characters, and a very real reason to learn French. This doesn't have to be every day, all the time. A five-minute battle at the start of the lesson can get everybody focused. One morning I had a Grade 6 class (a tough crowd by any measure) play Werewolf, an immersive game where players take on secret



identities and take turns attacking and accusing each other. It's amazing how good your French can get when you need to convince someone that you really are innocent. Then in the afternoon the class wrote about what had happened in game from their character's perspective. The result gave me chills. It was personal, detailed, easily the best writing piece they produced all year. Because it wasn't just made up, they had been there.

To be clear, this isn't about tricking kids with chocolate-covered broccoli. They are way too smart for that. It is about giving students a buy-in, a genuine reason to want to learn and use French in class. One way to reinforce this is to help them visualize their progress, just like characters in their favourite role-playing game gain Experience and Level Up. If Pokemon can get stronger with every battle, evolve and learn new skills, so can our students. Congratulations adventurer, here is a bronze sword for your trouble. You may now enter level 23 of the dungeon but I must warn you, the monsters are significantly tougher (and the books longer)... Do you dare enter?

Of course, this doesn't mean my class is playing a game all the time, but it

always has the potential to turning into one. Here are some ideas when you need to shake things up and turn a mundane activity into an unforgettable adventure, whether that's for an afternoon or for an entire unit:

- ✧ The class has traveled back in time to Ancient Egypt. After days walking through the desert, they finally arrive at their destination. Unfortunately, the Sphinx will only let them into the pyramid if they answer his 10 riddles before sunset. Students must visit the great library at Alexandria (just down the hall) and retrieve a mysterious book that contain the answers.
- ✧ Every student who gets 80% or more on their test gets one attempt at a nearly impossible basketball shot. Imagine, legend status amongst your peers for the rest of the year. You know that's going on YouTube.
- ✧ Ridiculous and funny is also memorable. Do the worksheet using your non dominant hand for double the points. Read the paragraph

while pinching your nose standing on one foot. You'll be surprised how many students actually enjoy the added challenge.

- ✧ From spelling to casting spells! The Friday Morning Boss has 100 HP (Health Points). Every Dictée word spelled correctly by a student will deduct 1 point. Get the Boss's health to 0 to win the battle!
- ✧ An hour playing a cooperative boardgame like Codenames, Pandemic, Hanabi, Forbidden Desert, or SOS Dino isn't just a fun Friday afternoon reward. They're using French and working together in real situations to solve very real problems.
- ✧ My absolute favourite and easiest game to play is the classic "Ni oui, ni non". It couldn't be any simpler: students cannot use yes or no. Watch how a quiet morning suddenly turns into students asking each other a million questions to try and trick each other. ■