

# “Mastering *Monsterwelt*: Increasing Motivation & Student Output via Gamified German”

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## I. Why *Monsterwelt*, and what is it?

The motivation for this project arose from two sources:

1. Suggestions I found in the book *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing our Kids for the Innovation Era* by Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith (2015), which claims that 21st-century-foreign-language courses will seek to achieve the following results: 1.) True proficiency in speaking, 2.) Understanding cultures and ability to navigate them, 3.) ability to collaborate across cultures, 4.) technology-leveraged polylinguality.<sup>1</sup>

2. Interaction with students in a second-semester German class (GER G112) in 2015.

The first motivation likely explains itself, but I will add that I felt inspired to try to achieve what Wagner and Dintersmith call “true proficiency in speaking,” although I would insert the additional phrase “at the given level.” That is, for around two years now, my aim has been to enable students to speak at the second-semester level, if that is where they find themselves in their studies. I hope to achieve the same results at the first-, third- and fourth-semester levels, too, especially if the results of this study and other similar studies I do show that *Monsterwelt* is an effective tool. Experience tells me that a student’s success and degree of progress in a foreign language is, among other things, limited by his or her level of motivation. *Monsterwelt* seeks to raise motivation by shifting the focus from rote memorization and passive understanding of German words and grammar, which we achieve quite well in our German classes at IPFW, to learning the language for use in an environment where it is necessary for survival.

Before I created *Monsterwelt* and other similar activities, my classes focused on delivering passive fluency. Since students in class must listen to me speak, and I can already speak German, they increasingly gain the ability to understand my German. They can read and write to some degree, as well, but speaking often remains a dream, something I cannot expect to impart to my students. I put them in groups to do discussions in German, and we have oral assessments, which usually go quite well, but students seldom leave any section of German with the ability to speak fluently (i.e., with ease and with varied sentence patterns) at that level, even though it is always theoretically possible. The problem is, in my view, students must want to speak, if they are going to develop the ability to speak. Since most people are nervous about trying—and sometimes may

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith, *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing our Kids for the Innovation Era* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 134.

even discover that they have no thoughts in their head at all when trying to put together a sentence in a foreign language—the goal seems nearly unachievable. Among those who major or minor in German we do see huge progress, but these students truly want the language. How, I have wondered, does one get those who are merely in the course but may not have a burning desire to speak (something akin to an obsession, I think) to develop speaking ability? *Monsterwelt* is one of my answers.

On the second point, I have much to say, and I will use this section to explain what *Monsterwelt* is, as well. In 2015, I noticed that students were doing poorly on vocabulary exams, which are given for every chapter we cover before the chapter exam. The weight of the vocabulary exams is relatively high, and so I was concerned. When I asked students how many of them never studied, at least a third (or even half?) of the class admitted to never preparing. Immediately, I began to create games that focused on vocabulary that we could use in the classroom, and I noticed the improvement almost immediately. During one game session in class, one student who had admitted to having extreme difficulty with the vocabulary commented that s/he had begun to study more regularly since the class had begun to play the game.

After this undocumented success (e.g., only informal data) in the classroom, I decided to create games that tackle a second recurring problem, output. As mentioned above, it is very difficult to get students to speak the language. I designed *Monsterwelt* with the intention to motivate and distract the students so as to enable them to speak more regularly in German during class time.

In a nutshell, *Monsterwelt* is a game in which students take on the role of either hunters or gatherers and get information about the world in which they live in order to solve various problems their community faces. Their community is threatened, and they have had to flee to unknown territory where everything around them looks like a monster. Thus, they must find out as much as they can about their new environment and then use that information to solve problems. In order to solve their community's problems, they work in small groups of no more than four people (their survival group), but they are still part of the larger settlement. They must be creative, and they must everything in German.

The initial version of *Monsterwelt* was a bunch of simple rules I made up and a Camtasia video with a story set in a forest-type region of a fictional world I created. I made various drawings (unusual fauna (i.e., monsters), unusual flora, tools for the students to use to solve problems) so that students would have to interact both visually and also aurally with the material we were trying to learn.

My CELT summer project was to expand this world by making two new videos that covered more unknown territory around their settlement, rivers and lakes (one video) and (hills and mountains). Vocabulary for landscape types is part of second-semester German, so the world I created matches and expands on what students have to learn, anyway. I decided to add an actual rulebook (24 pages with many new drawings and a full-color cover (front and back) with brand new tools for the new environments into which students would have to journey). In total, there are now 16 new monsters and 16 new plant types with which they must interact to solve the various problems that threaten their community. In addition to the expanded rules, the rulebook also

contains several pages that cover the personality of the new persona the students will take on. This feature allows the class to review a lot of what they learned in first-semester German, because they have to introduce themselves to their survival groups (ideally, made up of four people). They also have to introduce members of their survival team to everyone else, since everyone is also part of the settlement. The rulebook also contains a world map (a more detailed version of something I created for the first version of the game), lists of problems they can choose to solve, explanations of what they will likely encounter in this new world, drawings and descriptions of special items they might find, legends of beings who might help or hinder their progress, work sheets for the problems they solve, and a page for keeping track of the problems they have successfully solved, as well as skills they have picked up along the way.

According to the new rules, much of the grade for participating in *Monstwelt* is simply the usual participation grade for the course, but it must be earned bit by bit during the game. Since failure is optional for this part of the overall grade but not optional for the survival of the fictive settlement of *Monsterwelt*, students must speak to survive and to help their fellow settlers survive. In total, each survival group must solve 10 problems over the course of the semester to earn the total portion of the grade that is just for *Monsterwelt*.

To make the game more exciting, I also drew and wrote up 10 *Katastrophenkarten* (Catastrophe Cards) from which students must draw five times a semester. On the day a catastrophe hits the settlement (drawn at random by a student from a survival group), everyone in the settlement (the entire class) must solve the problem in 15 minutes. If they solve the problem, they earn nothing toward their overall grade but they ward off the catastrophe. If they fail, a student in the survival group that drew the card loses his or her special ability that is supposed to help the individual and the group survive. Note: as stated above, the rulebook also contains legends and potential allies/enemies to make play more interesting, as well as special items they might find. These two elements to the game can be used to adjust the difficulty of the game for the given group, depending on how the game plays out. The object is neither to make the class easy nor to get the students to fail, so these elements can be used to tip things in either direction.

## II. Brief Theory behind *Monsterwelt*

So as not to repeat ideas in my grant proposal, I will keep the theory here simple. The theoretical underpinnings for *Monsterwelt* are manifold (see, for example, work by Saga Briggs, studies done at the University of Tampere, Finland, and the University of Toronto). First of all, games are known to be effective in teaching (although it is not a given). One important part of *Monsterwelt* is that it makes things impersonal. Speaking in front of people can cause many students to feel nervous, as mentioned above, but playing a game in which one must speak may take the focus off of the learning to such a degree that students will feel more comfortable trying to speak. That is, they may feel that they are merely playing a game, rather than learning a language, and thus feel more comfortable.

Interacting with *Monsterwelt* give students something on which to focus their language production, which is an important reason for using this game as a teaching tool. All too often, the sentences one produces as sample sentences for the lesson are strange. They seem unrealistic, because they are just examples. They create a highly abstract atmosphere about speaking, where the

message seems to be something like the following: If one were to speak, one might say such and such. The primary purpose of such example sentences is to demonstrate a grammatical point. With *Monsterwelt*, the focus can be shifted to solving a problem that exists in a sphere external to the textbook lesson (BUT for which knowledge of the given chapter is necessary). Thus, students have a sort of real-life reason to create “real” utterances, not just examples of what one might say. After all, they will actually be in a threatening fictional environment and have to talk their way out of it.

Finally, by using the videos I have created for the course I also flip the classroom and thus free up time for practice during class time. Karen Muldrow has written on the effectiveness of using a video in a course and notes that “creating effective content ... is the first step in thinking outside the box.” *Monsterwelt* seeks to become just such an outside-of-the-box approach to activating languages.<sup>2</sup>

### III. Project Description

After creating the materials for the project, I had to implement it in the classroom and measure its effectiveness. For this first study (probably one of several I will do to test *Monsterwelt*), which began in Spring Semester 2017, I am trying to learn whether the game increases student motivation to learn for the class and also to continue on to the next level of German. I am also looking for increased creativity with the vocabulary and increased complexity of utterances. To measure any increase in motivation and or complexity of sentences, I have created entry and exit sheets with questions about motivation. I have also created extra sections on the usual oral assessment sheets to record unusual sentences.

Since the class is still under way, I have no formal data to report, but I anticipate that, at the very least, the complexity of spoken sentences will increase. I am less confident that I will see a rise in motivation to continue on to the next level. In my view, there are simply too many cues in American society that suggest that learning a language other than English is not worth one’s time and money for one semester with *Monsterwelt* to change. It will likely continue to be a goal toward which I will work throughout the future.

### IV. Results

I cannot report anything more than that the class has begun, and *Monsterwelt* is presently a solid part of the students’ consciousness. That is, I sense excitement when we look at a part of the rulebook or do one of the preparatory activities in it (e.g., choosing to be hunter or gather and introducing oneself to the survival group, etc.), but the actual problem-solving comes halfway through the semester, after students have gained an understanding of the notorious two-prepositions in German. These prepositions are often hard for students to learn. With this type of prepositions, one must use the article either in the accusative case to indicate movement or the dative case to indicate that something or someone is in that position or at that spot. An example is: *I go into the room, AND I am in the room.* The first sentence would have to contain an accu-

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Muldrow, “A New Approach to Language Instruction—Flipping the Classroom,” *The Language Educator* (November 2013), 29.

sative article after the preposition *into* to indicate movement, and the second sentence would have a dative to indicate location. It is difficult enough for students to distinguish these forms passively (i.e., when spoken to), but it is far more difficult to get students to master them actively (i.e., become able to use them in their own spoken language).

*Monsterwelt* seeks to facilitate the activation of the two-way prepositions. Since students must go to places in this world to solve problems, they must express themselves correctly using the preposition and the accusative case. When they arrive at their destination, they will find things, flora, and fauna in various places, which are expressed with the preposition and the dative. To interact with any of this stuff, they must use choose which case is correct, which will vary. In this way, they can only face adversity by actively applying the knowledge they have gained in the class.

## V. Lessons Learned through this Undertaking

I did not realize the amount of time it would take to create everything for this game and the study I have begun. Of course, I had some idea of how many weeks it might take to do the drawings and write up the story and then create the expanded rules, but I did not foresee having difficulty creating brand new creatures and plants with distinct effects on the game. Each drawing took roughly 24 hours to create. Naturally, I did not do each one in a single sitting. The story was also challenging, since I had to write it in pieces and then put out the various fictional facts on a chart to make sure that I was not repeating myself too much or changing something I had said earlier. After all, the world must seem to function logically, even if it is fictional. Creating the Camtasia videos also took more time than anticipated.

Above all, after the videos, it was the rulebook itself that demanded the most energy. Writing up all of the rules and creating individual pages with distinct drawings took an enormous amount of time. In fact, I hurried through it toward the end, because I wanted to meet the deadline I had set myself of finishing by the end of December 2016. I needed to have the rulebooks printed up for all of the students in class, which itself required a bit of time.

Ultimately, I am glad that prepared as much as I did, for now the game is simply ready to go for the entire semester. I do not need to make any extra problems or print out handouts or send emails to students with documents in them that I made the night before. Everything is contained in one booklet, and the students carry it with them and can use it for the entire semester, much like a textbook. The pictures of the new tools also will be a reminder of how they might solve problems when they are working in their survival groups in class.

Finally, I will add that just recently the study I designed has struck me as potentially weak. I have never done a study of this sort and, while I do think that it will produce some meaningful data, there is so much more that I could do to test the effectiveness of *Monsterwelt*. I will certainly strive to do so in future semesters. It strikes me as possible that the hard-thinking that goes into the design of a study (i.e., the mechanism by which one elicits the data one needs) may be where real brilliance is required, not exclusively in the results and the theory one develops on the basis of the data.

## VI. Conclusion

In the end, any success that this first study may have will be partially attributable to simply having the entire game finished and ready for use throughout the semester. Since it is all finished, it can appear to be a seamless world, because it is not coming to the students in pieces. If they ask questions about the world, I have an answer, because I have completed it (up to this point, at least). The realistic quality of the fictional world has thus been heightened, which may raise the level of motivation, since the problems they face may seem more real. At this point in the semester, I frequently ask students questions like whether they think that it might be necessary to learn the dative case for use in *Monsterwelt*. They always know to say, “yes,” but this playful way of reminding them of what they have to know may be an effective tool for motivation. We can talk also about the possibility of monsters that eat people who do not know the dative case, since anything is still possible. They may also wonder whether they need to know how to use a preposition and the accusative in order to move out of the way of some approaching danger in *Monsterwelt*. Indeed, they may already be thinking about how they would say it.

Even though I do not yet have real data to offer, I can anticipate that the game will be quite effective for as long as one has the students in the course. I have overheard them talking about it and what might be coming. I have also seen the expression of excitement on certain faces when I have asked them to get their *Monstwerwelt* rulebooks out. Such informal data bodes well for the game. Once the weekly interactions with *Monsterwelt* get started and the game becomes part of their learning experience both inside and outside of the classroom, I expect students to feel a connection to the world they are pretending to inhabit. I feel confident that they will seek to resolve conflict and avoid danger via the German language that they have been learning in my course. If it is as effective as I anticipate, I hope to bring *Monsterwelt* to a much wider audience outside of IPFW, both through conference presentations and also scholarly articles.