
Interview With Dr. Julie Sykes

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Dr. Julie Sykes is Assistant Professor of Spanish and Hispanic Linguistics at the University of New Mexico. She delivered a keynote address at the Second Language Studies Symposium titled Digital game-mediated language learning: From ideas to implementation. This interview took place on 2/24/2012. Her website can be found at <http://www.unm.edu/~spanport/faculty/sykes/>.

Would you talk a little bit about your language learning and teaching background?

I started learning Spanish when I was in high school, so I traveled abroad. My parents were really awesome, and they let me go by myself or with programs. So I lived in Spain and Costa Rica, and that's how I started learning Spanish. I majored in Spanish and International Studies in my undergrad. So I knew I always wanted to do intercultural communication, I just didn't know how to do that. So the plan was to take the foreign service exam and study, and so I had a professor who said, why don't you just go to grad school and keep up your Spanish while you're studying for the exam, and I decided, why not. It turns out that I just fell in love with linguistics and pragmatics specifically, and intercultural communication. So, the rest is history. I did my MA and PhD in applied linguistics and SLA, and now, I work as assistant professor of Spanish and Portuguese, mostly SLA, at University of New Mexico. I also supervise 35 graduate students in the first four semesters of Spanish as the coordinator

of the language program. So, I get to do lots of work with training, methodology, lower-division courses, curriculum, and that kind of thing, which I actually really like as well. I research different acquisition pragmatics and intercultural communications.

Do you currently teach Spanish?

I don't. I just teach graduate courses in methodology. So I teach the typical sort of training course for TAs, and then I also teach technology, and I teach pragmatic acquisition, graduate courses mostly. I teach one undergraduate course in the summer, Hispanic linguistics mostly. I also supervise all those language courses, like I said.

I've noticed that you work a lot with a professor at the University of Arizona. How did that collaboration start?

Jon Reinhardt is the professor that I work with down there, and he and I were graduate students at the same time, went to the same conferences, and so we just built a network of good colleagues. We've both worked with Steve Thorne. Steve was Jon's dissertation director, and then Steve worked with me as a

favor to me, which was great. So, this natural collaboration developed from being interested in the same work, but also enjoying working together. So, I guess we both feel like cross-institutional collaboration is really important and really fun for both of us. You know, two minds are always better than one.

How did you get the idea for Mentira [a virtual reality game for teaching Spanish pragmatics that is played using iPod touches], where you play out in the world, and the game is part of the world?

I work with another professor at UNM, Chris Holden, who got his PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Games, Learning, and Society Program. He has actually been building AR (augmented reality) games for a long time, mostly for middle school students in sciences and ecology. So, he had a lot of experience in games. He and I actually met at a games conference, Games+Learning+Society, the summer before we both started at UNM, so it was just coincidence that we both ended up at the same place. So, really, I started working on place-based games because of him. It was circumstance, and I got really excited about place-based games for language learning. Being in Albuquerque, place-based games for Spanish are relevant because we have many Spanish-speaking communities, and there's a very long history of Spanish and Hispanic culture in lots of different things in New Mexico, so it's kind of a natural place to do it.

Would you say that games for language learning is your main research interest?

It's one of my two primary areas. I'm really interested in intercultural

pragmatics. Even with my master's thesis, I started working in pragmatic acquisition. Digital games are a by-product of that and, in a sense, have become primary just because of their nature and newness in the field. They give us lots of fresh areas to look at and things we don't know. I've combined these two interests, and that's what I'm most interested in. How do we utilize innovative technologies, not just because they're innovative but rather, to overcome some of these challenges we've been facing? In the last three or four years, we've really witnessed this shift in the way communication is mediated, the way mobile phones are used, the way digital gaming interfaces with real life. Language, of course, is a part of that, so just by the nature of where the world is going, that's what I've been interested in. Pragmatics is always a part of any of that.

Is Croquelandia [a 3D simulation game for teaching Spanish pragmatics] finished at this point?

In terms of development, yes, definitely. We're not going to move forward in developing Croquelandia. I still have a huge amount of data that needs to be analyzed. I've published four or five articles on different aspects of that data. It was a first time attempt, really, at anything for language learning. We've seen Zon out of Michigan State, actually, but we haven't seen a lot of data on it, so it would be nice to get some data if we could. But because we hadn't seen a lot, we didn't really know what we were doing when we developed Croquelandia. I think we've learned much of what we can learn from that experience, and now it's time to build and start over. We'll do it very differently the second time around. I'm looking forward to doing that. Right now,

I'm tied up with place-based games, but it doesn't mean it's at the exclusion of the other kind. It's just a matter of time, resources, and platforms. Game design and game publication is actually quite intensive. It's like designing an intervention, but much more complicated. So we actually consider them publications in their own right.

That's interesting that you say that you consider those to be publications. Do tenure committees also view them that way?

Yes and no. Definitely not the same way they would a scholarly publication. But very much like creative writing, the same way poetry might count or a creative novel. That's generally the consensus on where those might fit. The language is sort of a report on where digital scholarship in general falls, and that's what I think we're trying to figure out.

So, when you talk about game design, what exactly does that mean? Does that mean that you're writing the code? Or does that mean that you're designing how it's going to work?

Game design happens in a lot of ways. I'm not a programmer, really. I do a little bit, dabbling here and there, but not really. I definitely couldn't do a 3D game, for example. So, mostly, the design I do is around storyboarding, dialog, characters, narrative, and feedback mechanisms, and everything related to that. It's very complicated. There's a whole process of game design and what things you need to consider. Jesse Schell at Carnegie Mellon has a great book on game design that inspires our work. That's just one example. There are quite a few out there. It's a matter of

starting from the bottom up. All the text has to be built and all the images. Aris, which is the game platform we design in, is nice. It's out of the University of Wisconsin, it's open source, it's free to use.

That's the platform you used to make Mentira?

Yes, that's the one we used to make Mentira and this new game we're working on. Chris Holden is on that design team as well for the team for Aris, so they built things into Aris to give us capabilities that we wouldn't have otherwise had. So that's a part of a design phase as well. We tell them, no, we need to be able to do this, for example. Right now, we're working on getting audio, something that's really important for languages. Can we get audio to work as well as text?

If you're not the one who's coding these games, there must be quite a bit of money needed to hire people to do it.

Right. Croquelandia was really nice in that there was a team of programmers looking for some content, and so we each brought something to the table. It wasn't free, of course, but it was part of the university's program time to work with these experimental technologies. In the case of Aris, Aris is free and open source, and you don't need any programming at all. So the coding money, of course, goes into Aris, but not into Mentira itself. We work with them very closely to help create exemplars that can be used to gain funding, and Aris has gained quite a bit of traction. It works very much like a normal open source project, off grant money, things like that. Basically, Mentira was built with \$10,000 of internal grant money from UNM. Graduate student time and

devices is what that paid for; that was it. It's been nice. We've been finding the work-arounds. We call it ecological design. What can we build for the least amount of money, but still make it compelling and interesting?

The games that are being developed in Aris are all over the world and have really shot up in number in the last year. So, and there's funding coming in from the Library of Congress. It's a very well supported platform, which is why we're interested in working with them. Again, we work really closely with them to hopefully ensure its continuance and its success. They've really stayed true to that open-source spirit thus far, which is exciting. You can download Aris for free on your iPhone right now. You can search for Mentira, and you can play Mentira. I can send you the codes and you can play without being in the place. We'd prefer not to publish the codes, mostly because we have students still playing. We're happy to share, but we don't want them to just Google the codes.

I think that one of the exciting things about CALL and about gaming is that it's always changing, and there's always something new to learn. But I've also heard people argue, how could you possibly research that? As soon as you publish something, it's on to the next thing. It's already old. So, what would be your response to that?

My response is two-fold. One, it's not about the tool. It's about the behaviors. Game-based behaviors have been around for a long time. We see them in more complicated, visually rendered spaces. But game-type behaviors have been around for a long time. It's just something that we're now starting to take seriously for learning. On top of

that, that's the reality of life. Everything's changing. The way people communicate is changing. We've seen the way Facebook sort of has enculturated an entire world into building networks. Whether you think that's positive or negative is irrelevant. The reality is that that's what's going on. So I think that's something you have to take seriously, regardless of the complications involved. You have to be willing to publish, and say, hey, that's out of date. This is what we know now, and all of that body of knowledge, I think, leads into important research that we need to pay attention to and take seriously.

I understand that games are your focus right now, but do you think that there are any other important directions within CALL that you might want to pursue in the future?

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, anything that involves collaboration and social learning. Kind of Web 2.0, but I think we've moved a little bit beyond that now. But mostly I think CALL people need to start really paying attention to social change and the things that are coming about as a result of some of those changes. Goodfellow, Lamy, and Steve Thorne talk a lot about some of these critical approaches to using technology. I tend to agree with them and say yes, language learning is changing, but the needs of language learners are also changing, and that's really what we need to pay attention to as we're moving forward in CALL research in general. Telecollaboration, for example. There's a new volume that just came out that addresses some of these issues, and I think that that's important and something that we really need to critically think about as we're moving on.

Thinking about students in SLA or SLS, in general, what sort of advice would you give to students right now? And which areas do you think are exciting to work in now?

My first piece of advice is something I always tell my advisees: find something you like doing. If you don't enjoy it, don't do it just because I think it's cool as your advisor. Don't do it because it's the cool thing to do, or it's what's going to get you published, or it's what's going to get you a job. Of course those are important considerations, but in the end, it's about what you're interested in working on and what you find most compelling because it's too much work and too much sacrifice not to enjoy what you're working on. I'm lucky in that I found a career and a profession that I really enjoy. It's hard work, and it's tiring, and all of those things, but it's worth it in the end because you feel like you're at least moving forward. In terms of CALL, again, I think there are tons of things. My advice is, find a language learning problem that you want to solve because there are tons of them out there. There are lots of things we don't know. Of course, I have to put a plug in for pragmatics because I think it all boils down to pragmatics in a lot of ways. Steve Thorne and I were talking the other day, and he mentioned the idea that everything boils down to how communication happens. So for me, of course, that's an interesting area, but it's also really complicated. It doesn't have a lot of black and white answers, and so, if there's a student who really needs black and white, statistical responses, it's harder to find in pragmatics. You have to be willing to tolerate ambiguity to get the kind of answers we're looking for. But what are you interested in solving and what tools are available out there to

help us solve that, be it replicating different mechanisms or utilizing what's already out there?

Thank you very much for your time today.

Thanks for inviting me, and I'm glad to be here at MSU.