

## Chapter 4.19

# A Video Game, a Chinese Otaku, and Her Deep Learning of a Language

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### ABSTRACT

It is a buyer's market for employers in today's global village, where having another language under your belt could make the difference at an interview between employment or the dole queue (unemployment line). Learning additional languages rapidly has been the goal of immersion schools, and their approaches are effective in many respects because they make use of situated learning experiences in communities of practice. Such experiences present their own challenges however, as living in the country of the chosen language for a considerable period of time may not be possible. Migrant workers too may be shunned by native speakers, particularly if they have little or no knowledge of the native language, reducing learning opportunities to en-

gage in discourse. Video games may be one way to address these challenges. In order to do this, however, more must be understood about the ways in which games support these theories, the way individuals learning a second language interact with them, and what researchers and developers of serious games must know to support this use of games. This chapter will outline the relevant theories for second language learning, describe how they operate in games, and present guidelines for research and development of serious games and second language acquisition.

### INTRODUCTION

*Tell Me and I Will Forget  
 Show Me and I May Remember  
 Involve Me and I Will Understand  
 - Confucius 430BC*

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This is a longitudinal qualitative study of how a ‘virtual world’ of commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) video games was providing a safe space for an intermediate-level second language learner. The study investigates her ability to develop *deep learning* of English by engaging in extensive video game-play in the target language. Drawing on Vygotskian principles of research, which focus on the process and not the outcome of development, this small-scale research project explored, through interview, the process of learning to play *Deus Ex*<sup>TM</sup>.

I chose the title of this project having read Tobin’s (1999) experiences with his son entitled *An American Otaku*. As the computer miniaturizes into ‘must-have’ fashion accessories such as mobile phones and handheld gaming devices, a new generation is buying into the cyber age. Tobin (1999) used it to describe his son’s fanaticism with the role-playing game *Warhammer*<sup>TM</sup> and his immersion into cyberculture at the beginning of the millennium. As a father of a teenager, he asks himself pertinent questions about the possible ramifications of using this new technology—such questions as whether a life on the Net can be satisfying, and whether his son’s self-confidence and the interpersonal skills he is developing through e-mail communications can translate into real life? Will he have ‘real’ (face-to-face) friends? Do otaku grow up to be happy, normal adults? The fixation on new technology that stigmatized otaku a decade ago is now in common use among teenagers growing up in technologically advanced societies that are rapidly being changed by the technology of the integrated circuit and the Internet. The title reflects how the subject, Zoe, a mainland-Chinese English Language student, was drawn in to extensive video game-play by effective game design despite the barrier of the second language. Like an otaku, she would spend many hours alone playing the video game *Deus Ex* on her laptop in the host family bedroom.

## The Research

For the sake of brevity, the background to how the research was initially set up has not been included; the details of how the subject Zoe was found, the year-long platonic relationship of the author with the subject as a support tutor in her curriculum studies, and how, through many conversations about learning styles, she agreed to participate in this study have also been left out. Similarly, the ethical considerations that were taken into account prior to, during, and after the study have been edited, only including those areas which may impact on future research.

## The Subject

‘Zoe’ is from China and in her early twenties. She has been studying in England for nearly three years. She remained with the same host family for this time. She came to the UK having completed her Chinese (full board) high school studies with the intention of improving her English sufficiently, so as to enter a UK university. She was preparing applications to universities during the time of this study. She proudly announced her Communist roots to me—that her father was a prominent member of the Party in her city and that she would need to undergo a re-education program on her return to China (in order to reintegrate with Chinese society), having completed her studies in the West. She was keen to study Japanese culture on her degree course (citing that “you should know your enemy better than your closest friend”) and looked forward to living as an exchange student with a Japanese host family for a year.

## Preparatory Measures

Participant exposure to gore, violence, and death through the playing of *Deus Ex* was addressed and procedures put in place whereby the subject could contact the researcher directly should any concerns arise from video game-play. Also, an

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