

Chapter 19

Moving Towards an Ecological View of Second Language Learning in Multiplayer Online Games

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ABSTRACT

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are perceived to afford informal, contextualized L2 interaction. While earlier CALL research examined MMOGs as a tool for interaction and negotiation, more recent research is moving towards a game-as-ecology view, showing that L2 learning in MMOGs is a complex, interconnected, and dynamic process that is highly contingent on context. This chapter presents an ethnographic study of informal ESL learning mediated by multiplayer gameplay. Drawing on data from questionnaires, interviews, gaming sessions, and gaming journals, the author argues that L2 learners, when playing MMOGs at their own discretion, engage with those game discourses that align with their preferences of gameplay and goals of language learning. The study presented here adds to the growing evidence that affordances of MMOGs must be understood in relation to the learner's history, ability, and preference within the social context of gameplay. These components are interconnected and change dynamically in a coherent learning-gaming ecology.

INTRODUCTION

Research on digital game-based language learning and teaching has expanded greatly in recent years, as evidenced by a recent wave of journal special issues (Thomas, 2011; Cornillie, Thorne, & Desmet, 2012; Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014; Reinders & Chik, 2016) and edited volumes (Reinders, 2012). Among all types of digital games, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) have gained particular attention among computer-assisted language learning (CALL) researchers (e.g. Peterson, 2010, 2012; Rama, Black, van Es, & Warschauer, 2012; Rankin, Gold, & Gooch, 2006; Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Sholz, 2017;

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Sykes, Reinhardt, & Thorne, 2010; Thorne, 2008; Vosburg, 2017; Zheng, Newgarden, & Young, 2012). Because MMOGs allow players to cooperate and compete with each other on a large scale, even around the world, many CALL scholars are excited about its potential for informal, contextualized interaction in a learner's target language, including interaction with native speakers (Peterson, 2010; Thorne, 2008; Zheng, Young, Wagner, & Brewer, 2009; Zheng, D., Newgarden, K., & Young, M., 2012).

While early research has shown MMOGs as a promising environment for L2 interaction, a few recent studies (Rama, P. S., Black, R. W., van Es, E., & Warschauer, M., 2012; Scholz, 2017; Vosburg, 2017; Zhao, 2016) illustrate the complexity of L2 learners' language use in MMOGs. These studies suggest that L2 learners approach MMOGs in various and unique ways, depending on the learner-player's interests, goals, language ability, gaming proficiency, as well as the interlocutors with whom the learner-player interact. Building on recent research on game-based language learning, this chapter presents an ecological perspective of MMOG-mediated L2 learning.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Use of MMOGs in L2 Classrooms

MMOGs are network-based games that support large number of players simultaneously in the same world. They are usually set in a persistent, theme-based, fantasy world. This type of games incorporate several features that facilitate L2 learning. Immersed in a virtual world with rich narratives and high-quality graphics, players of MMOGs navigate the game through their avatars. This aspect of MMOGs is perceived to support identity exploration and promote engagement (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). In addition, MMOGs are designed to support group gameplay and social interaction. This is another appealing feature to CALL scholars, as MMOGs provide a safe, playful environment for L2 learners to interact with a large variety of interlocutors in the target language. Several classroom-based studies have found that playing MMOGs increases L2 learner's willingness to communicate and foster development of communicative competence. For instance, Reinders and Wattana (2014) reported increased confidence and willingness to communicate by learners of English after playing a commercial MMOG that had been modified to incorporate L2 learning quests and instructions. Peterson (2012) reported that L2 learner-players employed a variety of discourse management strategies when they interacted with each other in an MMOG, including greetings, leave taking, humor, small talk, informational language, request for assistance around questing. Peterson argues that the learner-players used these discourse management strategies to form in-game friendship and maintain collaborative relationship. In a similar vein, Zheng, Newgarden, and Young (2012) demonstrated the diverse types of communicative activities conducted by English language learners as they co-quested in *World of Warcraft*. A common thread running through these classroom-based studies is that the interactions among learner-players are motivated by gameplay and collaborative questing rather than by language learning. These interactions are thus characterized by positive affect, making MMOGs a safe, low-stress environment for language learning and use.

In terms of L2 acquisition, CALL research on MMOGs is overwhelmingly focused on vocabulary gains. A series of experiments conducted by Rankin and his colleagues (Rankin, Gold, & Gooch, 2006; Rankin, McNeal, Shute, & Gooch, 2008; Rankin, Morrison, McNeal, Gooch & Shute, 2009) found that MMOG playing promotes students' gains in vocabulary through their interactions with non-playing

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