

Chapter 40

L2 Languaging in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game: An Exploration of Learner Variations

Jinjing Zhao

Arizona State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper examines L2 learner variations in the context of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). MMOGs have gained much attention among CALL researchers because this particular game genre is perceived to promote informal, contextualized interaction in a learner's target language, including interaction with native speakers. However, there is little research on differences between L2 learners in terms of how they engage in language learning and use in the context of gameplay. Drawing on data from questionnaires, interviews, gaming sessions, and gaming journals, this paper argues that affordances of MMOGs must be understood in relation to the learner's history, ability, and preference within the social context of game play; L2 learners engage with various game discourses that align with their preferences of game play and goals of language learning. In closing, the paper discusses procedural challenges in conducting research on MMOGs and similar gaming contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming has become an everyday practice of many people around the world. This trend has given rise to the surging interest in digital games as designed environments. In the field of second language learning and teaching, the design and use of a diverse range of digital games has significantly expanded. One particular game genre - massively multiplayer online games (MMOMGs) - has gained particular attention among computer-assisted language learning (CALL) researchers (e.g. Peterson, 2010, 2012; Rama, Black, van Es, and Warschauer, 2012; Rankin, Gold, & Gooch, 2006; Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Sykes, Reinhardt, & Thorne, 2010; Thorne, 2008; Zheng, Newgarden, & Young, 2012). Because MMOGs allow players to cooperate and compete with each other on a large scale, even around the world, they offer opportunities for a great deal of informal, contextualized interaction in a learner's target language,

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including interaction with native speakers (Peterson, 2010; Thorne, 2008; Zheng, Young, Wagner, & Brewer, 2009; Zheng et al., 2012). However, the case study of Rama et al. (2012) has challenged this idealized narrative of MMOGs and showed the complexity of interactions in MMOGs. In their study, the two L2 Spanish learners had contrasting experiences in *World of Warcraft* (the world's most subscribed MMOG). The beginning L2 learner, who was an expert player of the game, developed communicative competence through interaction with Spanish speaking players. The advanced L2 learner, on the other hand, was new to the game, and found it difficult to interact with other players; she ended up spending much of her time navigating the game world. Their findings are consistent with the research of player-to-player interactions in MMOGs, which suggests that players at different levels in an MMOG engage in different levels of social interactions (Chen, 2009; Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). Collectively, these studies suggest that the affordances of MMOGs are tied to individual learner-players. The present study, taking an ecological perspective of L2 learning (van Lier, 2004), explores the variations between L2 learners in terms of how they engage in L2 learning and use, even when they play the same MMOG.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MMOGs for L2 Learning

The most appealing feature of MMOGs from a language teaching and learning perspective is that they provide a safe, playful environment that afford L2 learners opportunities to interact in the target language. Several studies have found that MMOGs increase 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 as a foreign language (EFL) after playing a commercial MMOG modified to incorporate L2 learning quests and instructions. Peterson (2012) observed 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 friendships and maintain collaborative relationships. In a similar vein, Zheng and her colleagues (2012) demonstrated the diverse types of communicative activities by English language learners who co-quested in *World of Warcraft*. Finally, Rama et al. (2012) illustrated the development of communicative competence of a Spanish learner over seven weeks of playing *World of Warcraft*. A common thread running through these studies is that the interactions among learner-players are motivated by game play and collaborative questing rather than by language learning. These interactions are thus characterized by positive affect. This feature of social interaction makes MMOGs a safe, low-stress environment for language learning and use.

In addition, playing MMOGs has been found to increase one's L2 vocabulary because the design of MMOGs compels learner-players to negotiate for meaning as they discuss co-questing strategies. 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 L2 English learner-players increased their English vocabulary skills through interactions with non-playing characters and with native English speaking players.

Moreover, the global demographic of popular MMOGs provides L2 learners access to diverse groups of interlocutors, thus offering opportunities for intercultural interactions. Thorne's (2008) analysis of

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