

Language learner experiences in an online virtual world

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This study looks at the experiences that two Japanese learners of English had playing an online fantasy role playing game. Samples of the types of interaction they encountered in the game itself as well as with other players are given. Excerpts from the participants' journals are used to provide a learner's perspective on their experience and to gain insight into benefits this type of virtual world might hold as a language learning resource.

Introduction

The Internet has come to permeate nearly every area of our society and the student of today needs the ability to navigate through a wide range of online environments in a variety of contexts. These contexts utilize nearly all of the world's languages and provide untold opportunities to the language learner. However, one emerging context is of particular interest due to its vast scope and interactive nature: online virtual worlds. These new worlds range in type from social networking sites like Mixi in Japan or Facebook, based in the United States, to online environments such as Second Life and Active Worlds. Every day, millions of users from all over the world gather in these virtual spaces and interact using media including text messages, voice chat, photo and video uploads, discussion forums, and collaborative documents called "wikis." In many cases, users also interact with their environment, accomplish tasks, and communicate with computer-generated characters. Real people are able to shape their online persona, influence the virtual space around them, and, in effect, create an alternate reality. What is the nature of the

language interaction that learners would encounter in these online environments? What value do they have for language learners? To answer these questions, it is necessary to explore these environments from the language learner perspective.

Online role-play that utilizes imaginary or virtual environments has been used in a variety of areas of education. Freeman and Capper (1999) looked at the use of an asynchronous online role-play simulation with graduate level business students. The study found that although simulation participants showed similar performance on exams compared with students from the previous year, they reported having a better understanding of complex market concepts and pressures often encountered in real life contexts. In addition, the majority of participants rated the role-play simulation as a useful experience with some commenting that it was a more enjoyable way to prepare for the final exam. Delwiche (2003) used an online fantasy role-play game as the medium for a class of undergraduate students to carry out ethnographic research on online gamers. Participants in this university course were able to explore various themes including construction of online identity and therapeutic effects of online role-playing. The students produced quality research projects, while also joining in a great deal of social interaction within the game environment.

Virtual worlds have also gained the attention of second language researchers. Peterson (2005) looks at the types of interaction engaged in by a class of 15 Japanese students of English exploring the free online virtual environment, Active Worlds. He divided their use of the avatars' communicative features as well as synchronous chat into two types of interaction: transactional, such as waving and use of discourse markers, and interactional, for example, greetings and politeness behavior. Although the interaction he describes resembles real world conversation and speech acts in many ways, Crystal (2001) provides a clear analysis of the ways in which the "Netspeak" characteristic of chat rooms and virtual worlds contains features of both spoken and written communication. He outlines several features that are unique to online communication and suggests that it might be better to consider it a "third medium" (p. 48). Stevens (2006), an article that itself made use of an online community during its drafting process, provides an overview of the popular online virtual world, Second Life, and gives brief descriptions of how it and other online environments have been used by language educators to promote interaction and task-based learning. Internet links are included in the article for further reading on most of the online courses, campuses, and organizations listed there. The current study seeks to continue the exploration of language learning in virtual worlds with a look at learner experiences in a fantasy online role-playing game.

Method

Procedure

Two Japanese university students with intermediate English-language proficiency were recruited for this study from the researcher's regular classes. They were told that they would be participating in a study on learner experiences in a virtual world, that they would need to be available for approximately 10 hours during the school break, and that they would receive a free lunch on the days of the research study. The participants spent four days playing the fantasy role-playing game, World of Warcraft (**WoW**) using anonymous accounts set up by the researcher, who also supervised and monitored each gaming session. While the participants explored the online world, the researcher took notes on their progression

in the game, as well as the types of language interaction they encountered. Each play session was videotaped for later reference. The participants had the opportunity to interact with other players online using text messaging, synchronous chat, and character emotes, all of which were automatically gathered and exported to a separate text file. The participants also interacted with non-player characters (NPCs), following instructions to complete various virtual tasks. After each session, which lasted 2–3 hours, the participants wrote in journals about their experience and then joined in a discussion with the researcher, which was videotaped for later review. The participants were encouraged to write and speak freely about any aspect of their experience that was interesting, challenging, or useful for language study. The researcher refrained from asking questions or guiding the discussion except in order to elicit more detailed descriptions or to clarify meaning. In total, each participant played the game for approximately 10 hours and spent about 2 hours journaling and discussing their experiences.

Players of online role-playing games often make use of third-party books and websites in order to answer questions that arise and to more easily complete their game objectives. In addition, it would be expected that non-native speakers in particular might encounter unknown vocabulary or jargon while playing a genre-specific game. Therefore, for this study, each participant was provided with a window for the game itself as well as four Internet browser windows:

1. An online dictionary (www.dictionary.com)
2. A dictionary of internet jargon (www.netlingo.com)
3. A wiki created by enthusiasts of this particular game, explaining virtually every aspect of the game including explanations of basic game concepts, detailed descriptions of NPCs, monsters, and quests, as well as background on the lore and history of the storylines in the game (www.wowwiki.com)
4. A website with game hints, such as maps, location of quest items, etc. as well as player comments and advice for other players (www.wowhead.com)

Participants

Participant 1 was a 19-year old Japanese male student who had just finished his second year at a mid-sized university of foreign studies in western Japan. He had been studying English for 8 years and, though he had never spent time in an English-speaking country, showed very good oral communicative competence, possibly due to his strong interest in foreign music and movies. His paper-based TOEFL score was 480. He described his own typing ability as good and said that he was very comfortable using computers. He had experience playing online role-playing games in Japanese, but not in English.

Participant 2 was an 18-year old Japanese female student who had also just finished her second year at the same university. She too had studied English for 8 years and displayed good oral communicative competence, having spent a total of two months studying abroad in Australia and England. Her paper-based TOEFL score was 470. Although she described her typing ability as “so-so” and said her ability to use computers was just “okay” she reported using the Internet every day. Unlike Participant 1, she had no experience playing online games.

Results

This study looks at the question:

What types of language interaction might non-native speakers of English encounter while playing an online, fantasy role-playing game in English?

The interaction observed can be divided into two categories: 1) Interaction with the virtual environment and 2) Interaction with other players.

Interaction with the virtual environment

Players begin **WoW** by creating a character, choosing from 10 “races,” such as human, elf, orc, or undead and 9 classes, for example warrior, mage, or druid. After customizing the look of their character, the players are transported to a virtual fantasy world in which other players from around the real world gather to follow quest lines, slay dragons, and engage in player-versus-player interaction, whether it be a friendly chat or deadly duel.

After listening to a short introduction to the game and basic instructions about how to play, Participant 1 created a human warlock character named Greedmister. His character began in the wilderness of the Elwynn Forest where the young warlock began testing out his dark magic spells on local beasts, such as wolves, and kobolds, little gremlin-like humanoids that make taunting jokes. Questgivers, marked with yellow exclamation marks above their heads, instructed him as to where to go and what to do. For example, the first quest, meant to familiarize new players with basic game movement and the Questgiver system, displayed the following text:

A Threat Within

Speak with Marshal McBride.

Description

I hope you strapped your belt on tight, young warlock, because there is work to do here in Northshire.

And I don't mean farming.

The Stormwind guards are hard pressed to keep the peace here, with so many of us in distant lands and so many threats pressing close. And so we're enlisting the aid of anyone willing to defend their home. And their alliance.

If you're here to answer the call, then speak with my superior, Marshal McBride. He's inside the abbey behind me.

After finding Marshal McBride and interacting with him by right-clicking on this **NPC's** avatar, a small window popped up on the screen with a text explaining a quest that would send Greedmister on his first adventure:

Kobold Camp Cleanup

Kill 10 Kobold Vermin, then return to Marshal McBride.

Description

64 Your first task is one of cleansing, Greedmister. A clan of kobolds has infested the woods

to the north. Go there and fight the kobold vermin you find. Reduce their numbers so that we may one day drive them from Northshire.

Rewards

You will receive: 2 copper pieces

With his background in online role-playing games, Greedmister jumped right into his first set of quests and began quickly progressing through the game environment. In his initial journal entry he wrote:

I found many words while playing. The words which I couldn't understand were not so many, and it was comfortable for me to play. The reason why I could follow is I've played online role-playing games like "Warcraft," I think. As to the words that I couldn't get, I could guess and if I couldn't, I used the dictionary.

He did, in fact, make use of the online dictionary provided, but during 10 hours of play, he looked up only three words. However, he took notes on a total of 14 words that he encountered, recording definitions for five of them, two of which he had recalled from memory. The longer he played, the less he relied on external sources for understanding vocabulary. After his second session, he wrote:

Almost all words were predictable and I could guess. And I think I get used to playing games.

After the third session, he explained another strategy he was using to understand the language he was encountering in the game:

Today, I didn't [look up] any words because I could guess by their pictures. And I felt it easy to read long sentences while I'm taking my quests. [At first], I had a little reluctancy to read long lines, actually. While playing this game, I didn't feel any difficulties today. I think I'm getting more used to playing [the] game in English.

Participant 2 had a more difficult time with the actual game play yet used several strategies for dealing with both challenging language and situations. After her initial orientation to the game, she created a night elf druid character named Woamay and was transported to the mystical land of Teldrassil. She described her initial experience in her first journal entry:

At first, I couldn't understand how it works and what I should [do]... It was hard to find where I was in the map and where I should [go]...however I could enjoy [my] character's power in the end.

Lacking the gaming background of the other participant, Woamay learned to navigate the game environment through a combination of trial-and-error, utilizing the third-party online resources provided, interacting with other players online, and asking the researcher, generally in that order. In one post-play discussion she described how a misunderstanding about the meaning of "by the cave to the north," led to her character's death at the hands of a cave full of spiders. After thinking more carefully about where the quest had asked her to go, she was able to complete her task. In addition, she used the online dictionary three times, looking up game-specific words like "nightsaber" and general words like "interpret." She also regularly looked up game concepts and looked for hints using either the game wiki (12 times) or another fan site (10 times).

Interaction with the other players

One reason for the success of Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Games (**MMORPGs**) like **WoW** is the degree to which players can interact with other players from around the world. Blizzard, the company that created the game, claims that the **WoW** universe includes over 10 million users, a population larger than that of Sweden, Israel, or Singapore. Players log into a distinct copy of the game world, called a “realm,” hosted on a server. Up to 6000 players may be active in one realm at any given time. While playing the game, players have several different means for interacting with other players:

1. Synchronous text chat channels – Players may join up to 10 distinct text chat channels, for example, among players located in one zone or city or between a party of players who have chosen to play together.
2. Instant text messages – Players can “whisper” to a specific player if there is a message that they wish to convey that is private.
3. In-game mail – Characters have their own mail account with which they can send and receive messages and items between both other players and **NPCs**.
4. Audio chat – Players in the same party can opt to use an audio chat channel provided they have a microphone.

Greedmister appeared to show more interest in the game itself at first, shying away from any social interaction with unknown players and admitted to not even looking at the streaming chat channels on his screen. On the second day, he wrote:

I was talked to by someone who I don't [know] today. I couldn't get what does she mean though. If I had a chance, I want to react next time.

By the last session, Greedmister had warmed to the idea of interacting with real people in the game, commenting:

Today, I talked to more people than I used to. Joined the group and did [a group quest called] called “Hogger,” and so on. When I lost my way, I asked everyone to tell me the way, and a man showed me.

While Greedmister began interacting with other players only after first becoming comfortable with the game, Woamay communicated with other players via text-messaging from the very beginning. On her first quest, in which she had been tasked with finding and culling the local breed of tigers called “nightsabers,” she decided to ask for help:

I asked where young nightsaber is to Greedmister in chat, but he didn't know (I thought he was searching same quest).

By her second day, Woamay had become well accustomed to using chat:

Today I met some people, and Greedmister and I talked a lot in chat because I didn't know how to pass my quest [items]. My bag was full and I had to sell to [a] person.

Despite progressing through the game levels more slowly than Greedmister, Woamay appeared to excel socially. On the last day, she became a member of a group of players called a “guild.”

2/4 12:17:50.543 Woamay has joined the guild.

2/4 12:18:11.342 [Guild] Drenchoman: hey

2/4 12:18:53.291 [Guild] Woamay: hey

2/4 12:20:00.667 [Guild] Woamay: where are you from?

2/4 12:20:15.546 [Guild] Drenchoman: nz

2/4 12:20:21.959 [Guild] Drenchoman: wbu

2/4 12:21:06.869 [Guild] Woamay: Japan

2/4 12:23:26.141 To Drenchoman: I have never been nz but i went to australia. Their sheep was cute.

2/4 12:23:52.141 Drenchoman whispers: lol oh.....

2/4 12:25:42.053 To Drenchoman: I ll go to take lunch. see you Drenchoman san

2/4 12:25:52.354 Drenchoman whispers: see ya

It is apparent that abbreviated language peculiar to the internet like “wbu” for “what about you?” did not inhibit Woamay’s ability to converse with her new guildmate. In her final journal entry, she commented:

When I joined [a] Guild and I talked with a man from New Zealand, I was so happy to [have a] conversation, better than when I talk in just chat.

Discussion

The current study is meant to be merely a glimpse into the fantasy **MMOPRG** world from the eyes of language learners. Certainly no conclusions can be drawn about how such an environment affects language acquisition or whether learners should be told to run out and buy the latest fantasy title. However, the experience of these learners does show potential experiences, both positive and negative, that learners may have if they venture forth into the misty mountains of a fantasy-genre virtual world.

Several aspects of these two participants’ experiences demonstrated positive characteristics of this environment for language learners. First of all, interaction with the game environment generally followed a task-based model defined by Breen (1987) as “any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task” (p. 23). Furthermore, the participants’ experiences appear to meet the conditions for using tasks within a communicative framework laid out by Brown (1994), which suggest that tasks: “point learners beyond the forms of language to real-world contexts,” “contribute to communicative goals,” incorporate “carefully designed elements,” make use of “well specified objectives,” and “engage learners in some form of genuine problem-solving activity” (p. 83).

In order to accomplish their goals the players made use of their own understanding of the game, hypothesis testing, interaction with other players, and Internet research. Success was rewarded with audio and graphic effects as well as accumulation of virtual wealth and status. Failure was discouraged through the death of their characters and the tedious run

back from the graveyard to the corpse for resurrection. In effect, the players had to comprehend the language presented for each quest accurately in order to progress in the game, and better understanding resulted in quicker and easier advancement through the game levels.

Another positive aspect of the game for these two language learners was the ability to collaborate on the tasks put before them. Early in the game, it appeared that the players could achieve their goals alone and "solo" most quests, however, as play progressed collaboration with other players became more common and, in fact, necessary for success in the game. Players of **MMORPGs** regularly work together with small, medium, and large groups of players, helping each other by sharing roles and information needed to accomplish their tasks and long-term goals. The fact that these group members need not be in the same physical location is a major bonus of online technology. The ease of finding interlocutors, both native and nonnative speakers of the target language, is certainly another benefit.

Some people learn foreign languages for professional reasons, others for social ones. One common aspect of virtual worlds is personal communication on a variety of subjects unrelated to the genre of the game. For many foreign language learners, real interaction in their target language is difficult to find outside of their classroom or without studying abroad. Online virtual worlds are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to anyone with access to the Internet. This offers an especially unique benefit to those with limited contact with proficient speakers of the language they are studying. Players of online games can in effect, take a virtual trip abroad anytime they wish. With this particular game currently available in eight different languages, it provides language experiences to not only learner of English, but others as well.

Playing a fantasy role-playing game is much like reading a highly interactive novel. Story lines diverge and players can become engaged in plot and character development. Such experiences provide deep exposure to new vocabulary and structures, some necessary for game play, others available just to those interested in a more literary experience. During this study, both participants displayed effective learner strategies, recording new words and seeking help when they could not understand. Because fantasy role-playing games are in many ways theme-based, there are many opportunities for recycling of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Lastly, many learners may find online role-playing games like this highly motivating ways to learn and practice language; the participants of this study certainly did. Unlike most educational materials, which begin with learning in mind, games begin with fun. Though the potential educational benefits of video games is an issue worth discussing, the continued success of game titles like *World of Warcraft*, which requires a paid monthly subscription to play, attests to the ability of this medium to catch and hold the attention of large numbers of people.

Of course, one would not want to paint an overly rosy picture of any potential educational resource and online role-playing games, such as *World of Warcraft*, do have several negative aspects for certain learners. One criticism of online environments for language learning stems from the pervasiveness of net lingo in game communication. In-game chat and online forums about games are littered with expressions that might mystify all those but the most net savvy. Whether interaction in this register is an asset to the modern language learner or an inhibitor to language acquisition is not yet known. Certainly some exposure to such context-specific language could benefit learners who will be utilizing online communication regularly, such as those engaged in distance learning. Whether students

with little other reason to go online should be required to add to their cognitive load with technical jargon or “leetspeak” is questionable.

On a similar note, **WoW** is a representative example of the fantasy role playing game genre, with fire-breathing dragons, heroic warriors, and toothless orcs. One might question the value of the large amount of game-specific or archaic language learners would encounter using such a medium as a language-learning tool. Those interested in a particular genre might find the unique lexicon engaging, while others might soon become frustrated. Much like selecting a good novel, genre should be considered by anyone looking to make a game part of their language learning regimen.

Conclusion

Obviously, this study is merely a peek into one virtual world and only offers a sample of potential experiences one might have. Issues such as genre, jargon, and extent of language use necessary will certainly differ among other virtual environments and there would be benefits to having other studies look at a variety of online game and non-game contexts. In particular, Second Life has piqued the interest of educators because of its highly adaptable features and private spaces. Another area for future investigation is the effect of a longer experience in a virtual world on language acquisition. The current study looked at the social interaction and task-based nature of this **MMORPG**, which required the participants to understand the directions stated in the text given for each quest. However, a deeper look at the degree to which learners understand the language presented, as well as the affects this reading has on their reading comprehension ability would be valuable. Looking at the experiences of learners with different ability levels would provide a better indication of what kind of language proficiency might be recommended to actively participate in a virtual world. Also, it would be interesting to see how a virtual world could be utilized in a classroom setting, even if that classroom only exists in cyberspace.

Technology and language are becoming increasingly intertwined and both language educators and learners are exploring how to best utilize new ways of communication. Virtual worlds, like any real world context, offer opportunities as well as risks. Those interested in using one of these worlds, whether it be a fantasy universe or some other vast network of users, should consider what kind of context they are entering, how best to utilize the medium, and what they would like to get out of it. After all, charging after a half-man, half-pig warlord with a group of adventurers from Australia, China, and Canada may be an ideal way to use and improve language skills for some, but certainly not for everyone.

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