Chapter 5

Using Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) to Support Second Language Learning: A Case Study of the Student Journey

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ABSTRACT

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) create large virtual communities. Online gaming shows potential not just for entertaining, but also in education. This case study investigates the use of commercial MMORPGs to support second language teaching. MMORPGs offer virtual safe spaces in which students can communicate by using their target second language with global players. Using a mix of ethnography and action research, this case study explores the students’ experiences of language learning and performing while playing MMORPGs.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, computer games have developed from single player game consoles to online gaming where large numbers of players play the game simultaneously over the Internet. Since the games progressively feel realistic and interactive, many researchers have discussed the potential of using online games to support learning and teaching. Rankin et al. (2006) point out that computer games allow learners to acquire deep knowledge by “learning by doing”. Playing computer games can offer active learning and the ability to view the world in new ways (Gee 2003). As online gaming becomes more common among young people, the excitement, enthusiasm, and entertainment from game play can motivate them to achieve in their educational endeavours.

Among the many genres of commercial games, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) have gained the most popularity. The game brings many players together in a large virtual community and serves both individual and social purposes such as enjoyment or forming interactive relationships among players. Commercial MMORPGs can differ from other genres of online gaming. While other genre can contain competitive and intensive achievement, Pearce (2009) posits that the MMORPGs’ virtual world has unique characteristics that supports a personal learning experience. One such characteristic is Persistence. Persistence in the virtual world allows the avatar – acting as the player’s medium in the virtual world- to continually evolve even when the player is logged off from the game. This characteristic plays an important role for players when they are immersed in the virtual world and engaging with it to support their learning (Koles & Nagy, 2014). They are not only seeking achievements to finish the game but are also developing the concepts of coherence, competiveness, and consistency in a virtual world that keeps changing (Pearce, 2009). MMORPGs can facilitate different in-game activities to support players in how to think, plan and solve problems. They can also help with learner motivation. According to Underwood et al. (2007), the characteristic of commercial MMORPGs are likely to offer individual players the opportunity to learn new skills through group problem solving, socializing and communicating within the virtual community. This social network role in MMORPGs benefits players, especially second language users (L2) by allowing them to practice their target language in a safe place with other players across the globe. The synchronous communication among players in the virtual world allows them to learn to use the
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