Chapter 14
The Usefulness of Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) as Tools for Promoting Second Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is twofold (1) to review the benefits of online videogames for promoting second language acquisition (SLA), specifically massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) and (2) to present new research that seeks to explain why and how MMORPGs may be beneficial. The findings from the research indicate that MMORPGs are beneficial to SLA primarily because they provide opportunities for interaction in the target language through participation in collaborative problem solving tasks. The results of the research presented in this chapter show (1) that the requirements of input and output for successful gaming allow for a type of interaction in which the focus on language form leads to modified-output, (2) that players have opportunities to negotiate input as a means of completing in-game tasks, and (3) that in-game tasks are similar to instructional tasks that are believed to be beneficial for SLA in the context of a classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for target-language interaction and access to rich sources of second language (L2) input have drastically increased over the past several decades as a result of technological advances—Internet bandwidth has grown, processor speeds have accelerated, and access to online technology has increased
The Usefulness of Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) for both L2 teachers and learners. The development of learning management systems (LMSs), which are software applications for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, and delivery of content for online courses, allow teachers to effectively deliver courses completely or partially online, thereby making access to online learning an essential component for educational enterprises in the 21st century. In the past decade, the number of students studying in online courses in U.S. post-secondary contexts has steadily increased. The total number of students studying online in 2012 was 6.7 million, which is 37% of the total number of students in U.S. higher education (Allen & Seamen, 2013). This number is an increase from 25% in 2010 (Blake, 2011) and 11.7% in 2003 (Allen & Seamen, 2013; OECD, 2005).

For almost 20 years second and foreign language teachers have been incorporating online tools such as chat rooms, wiki pages, and discussion boards into course and curriculum design (Dudeney & Hockly, 2012; Rubio & Thoms, 2013). The motivation for this practice has been aimed at providing language learners with increased opportunities to communicate and interact with teachers and other learners. Sykes and Reinhardt (2013) argue for the importance of interaction in language learning. Communicating with other people is the end result of language as a social meaning-making process. These scholars state that this process is essentially enculturation with the fundamental learning that takes place is through activity. The interaction that can take place online is thought to be especially beneficial to L2 acquisition. Blake (2011) argues that online language learning “stimulates students to spend more time engaged with second language (L2) materials, which ultimately promotes greater learning” (p. 21).

Since the early 1980s, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have recognized the importance of interaction as a key factor in SLA (Gass, 1997; Long, 1983; Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linne, 1996; Sykes, & Reinhardt, 2013). The results of interaction between language learners and highly proficient users or native speakers have obvious benefits when it comes to both the amount and type of language to which learners are exposed; however, research also shows that even without the presence of highly proficient users or native speakers, interaction between two or more L2 learners is beneficial and productive for SLA (Beauvois & Eledge, 1995; Lee, 2001; Long, 1996; Pica et al., 1996).

An often-overlooked technological resource for promoting interaction that L2 learners can employ is online games. Recent research on the use of online games as they relate to second language acquisition reports some very positive results, specifically for the genre of massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) (see, for example, Kongmee, Strachan, Montgomery & Pickard, 2011; Peterson, 2016; Scholz & Schulze, 2017; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). MMORPGs allow hundreds of gamers to interact in evolving virtual worlds at the same time via the Internet. L2 learners can cooperate and compete with one another on a large scale and oftentimes interact meaningfully with other L2 learners from around the world. Without the use of the Internet, this type of interaction would otherwise not be available to L2 learners.

In addition to an increase in the number of opportunities to interact with other speakers in the target language, there are additional benefits to L2 learners who participate in MMORPGs. L2 learners who play MMORPGs have opportunities to engage in cooperative problem-solving tasks that share many characteristics with effective language-learning tasks (e.g., language-learning tasks that provide opportunities for the negotiation of meaning). It is important to note that participation in MMORPGs is meant to supplement, not replace, classroom language-learning activity, so learners involved in MMORPGs can also benefit from interaction that occurs in the context of the classroom. In addition, MMORPGs provide opportunities for L2 learners to produce large amounts of output as they work cooperatively to complete in-game tasks. Output produced by one player is a meaningful source of contextual input for other players, thereby eliciting connected interaction between players. Results from the study discussed in