

Same Game, Different Learner-Players: Second Language Learning and Gaming Trajectories in a Multiplayer Online Game

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Abstract: This study examines the learning and gaming behaviors of two English-as-a-Second-Language learners who played a massively multiplayer online game. Using data culled from participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires, I describe how the students' gaming strategies and their second language skills interact to afford distinct language learning opportunities for the two students.

Introduction

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) have recently been hailed for their potentials for second language (L2) learning. Researchers have proposed that these gaming spaces offer opportunities for the development of language and literacy skills as learner-players collaborate in gameplay and develop interpersonal relationships (Rama, Black, van Es, & Warschauer, 2012; Thorne, 2008; Zheng, Newgarden, & Young, 2012). It has also been reported that participation in MMORPGs promotes learner's willingness to communicate and encourages language experimentation (Reinders & Wattana, 2011). Despite the surge of interest in the use of MMORPGs for L2 learning, there has been limited research on individual variations of L2 learner-players, who have diverse backgrounds in gaming expertise, preferences, and second language abilities. When MMORPGs are used in L2 learning and teaching, they may offer distinct learning opportunities to different learner-players. This study examines the individual variations of L2 learning in a MMORPG.

Individual Variations in Game Play

MMORPGs have been observed to attract players with different gaming styles and play motivations (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2007). Players with different motivations may demonstrate different gaming and languaging behaviors. For example, a player who is mainly motivated to socialize with other players may be found to be engaged heavily in interpersonal interactions; a player who is mainly motivated by in-game accomplishments may be found to concentrate on questing and information seeking; a player who is mainly appealed by the immersion experience of MMORPGs may be found to enjoy role-playing and storytelling. The individual variations in player motivations and gaming preferences imply that MMORPGs afford different languaging opportunities for different L2 learner-players.

Gaming expertise and L2 proficiency also added to the complexity of L2 learning in MMORPGs (Rama et al., 2012). Because the game community values expertise, L2 learners who are experienced players may benefit from gaming and the MMORPG community more than L2 learners who are novice players. The case studies by Rama et al. (2012) illustrates that L2 learners with gaming expertise are able to gain access to a variety of player communities which afford rich L2 languaging opportunities. Novice players, on the other hand, are likely to struggle with the mechanics of the game and have limited interactions with other players.

When taking into consideration gaming styles, gaming expertise, and L2 abilities, L2 learner-players are likely to take distinct learning and gaming trajectories in MMORPGs. This study shifts the focus of analysis from the affordances of the game environment itself to the interaction between the environment and the active learner-player.

Methods

This research project involved eight English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners who played *Guild Wars 2* (ArenaNet, 2012) in an afterschool English gaming club and at home for eight weeks. To examine the distinct experience of individual learner-players, I focus on two participants: Lynn, who is an advanced ESL learner, and Troy, an intermediated ESL learner. These two participants form a nice contrast because of their differences in English abilities and gaming backgrounds. Following the convention of case study research, data of this study came from several sources, including a questionnaire about game-mediated languaging behaviors, interviews, observations, and the participants' gaming journals. To analyze how the two learners engaged with game-related texts in English, I first examined the participants' responses to the questionnaire and then conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and their gaming journals.

Results

The responses of the focal participants are presented below in Figure 1. Apparently, Lynn mainly interacted with

texts embedded within the game (embedded game discourses), such as quests, conversations between NPCs, and descriptions of items and skills. She did not have much interaction with other players (emergent game discourses), even less with the player community (attendant game discourses). In contrast, Troy had a more balanced interaction with various types of game texts. He not only read texts embedded within the game (embedded game discourses), but also actively interacted with other players in the game world (emergent game discourses) and engaged with texts created by the player community (attendant game discourses).

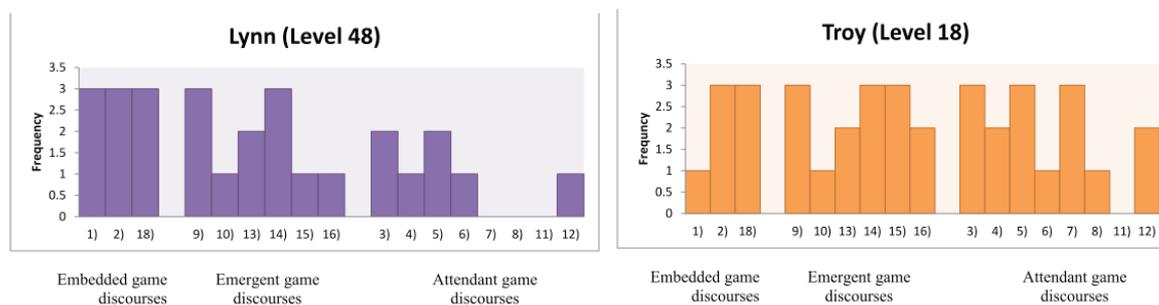


Figure 1. Lynn and Troy's engagement with texts within and around Guild Wars 2.

Discussions

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and the participants' gaming journals reveals four reasons that may attribute to the distinct L2 language patterns of the two learner-players: previous gaming experience, social norms of the player community, in-game levels, L2 learner status.

Previous gaming experience

Before the project, Lynn, the advanced ESL learner, had not played any video game in English. Although she had played MMORPGs, she played with her Chinese speaking friends. When she played GW2, she had difficulties with embedded and attendant game discourses due to her lack of game-specific vocabulary. She also had no interaction with other players in the game world except with the other participants of the study, whom she knew in real life. In contrast, Troy, the intermediate ESL learner, had not played MMORPGs before but he had played several games in English, including multiplayer strategy games. When he played GW2, he had little difficulties with the embedded and attendant game discourses. He also actively reached out to other players in the game world.

Social norms of the player community

Both participants found it hard to join the pre-established groups of players, both in the game world and in the online player communities. This limited their interaction with other players.

In-game levels

Congruent with the findings of Rama et al. (2012), higher level players have more languaging opportunities than lower level players, mainly through expert-novice interaction. Within the group of participants of this study, for example, Lynn gained a relatively higher level than the other participants. During the course of the project, she gave a presentation to the other participants where she used a lot of game-specific language to explain the rules and strategies of a game task.

L2 learner status

Being L2 learners, the participants often made deliberate effort to engage in language learning and language use during gameplay, even when it's not useful for gameplay. But at the same time, they also experienced anxiety when interacting with perceived native speaking players.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this poster are useful in advancing research of L2 learning in MMORPGs. The more we know about how individual factors affect the gameplay experience and learning process, the better we will be at effectively integrating video games into learning environments.

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