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Using World of Warcraft and Other MMORPGs to Foster a Targeted, Social, and Cooperative Approach Toward Language Learning

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Much of the current research in second language acquisition (SLA) stresses the social aspect of language acquisition. Creating a learner-centered environment that a) fosters collaboration and communication, b) keeps learners motivated and on-task, and c) gives them a say in choosing their goals and how to achieve them, can be extremely challenging. Students will benefit from a framework that offers a wide variety of solutions to a given "real life" situation--solutions that require different amounts of time as well as vocabulary and grammar in the target language.

MMORPGs

Many of these goals can be achieved using simulations or gaming. For foreign languages, games—especially massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs)—create a simulated environment of language immersion where students are given the opportunity to apply their language skills toward "real life" goals within an extensive context that is, by design, supportive of a wide variety of solutions. Because this framework already exists, the teacher is free to spend his or her time playing the role of guide, making sure students stay on task and receive the additional information they need to overcome obstacles on their way toward achieving their goal.

For those not familiar with MMORPGs, they are online role-playing games where players move, act and communicate with other players in an internet-based virtual three-dimensional environment. "Winning" is usually not the point of a MMORPG; rather, players group together online to achieve certain goals and thereby progress through the game. Communication plays a central role in the game. Audio and video are embedded throughout the environment, and it is also necessary to communicate with other players in the game through audio messengers or text chat programs.

World of Warcraft

I chose to focus on the game World of Warcraft for several reasons:

- At the moment, it is by far the most popular MMORPG and has a truly international scope with dedicated servers in the U.S., Europe and Asia.
- It allows for localization of the game into different languages.
- The structure of the game is similar to most MMORPGs.

World of Warcraft is a fantasy game populated with elves, dwarves, and other fantastic characters. Players choose their "race" and are given "quests" or tasks. In order to complete these tasks, the player is required to speak to characters controlled by the software, read texts, and speak and collaborate with other players through text chatting and messengers. This final aspect separates MMORPGs from other more traditional games. By making communication among the players a central aspect to the game, it provides a unique opportunity for teachers to make use of an already-existing virtual environment that requires students to use the target language to communicate with native speakers in order to achieve a goal.

The Social Environment of Language-Learning

Recognizing the social aspect of learning a language is key to understanding the potential of MMORPGs in a foreign language classroom. We gain a true understanding of a word's meaning, a grammatical construct, or proper use of a phrase not by translating into our native language, but rather by placing it within context. This context, whether we are reading or speaking, is inevitably a social one. Natural language never exists within a vacuum. One of the principal thinkers in this area is James Paul Gee. Gee refers to a family of related viewpoints that he calls "situated cognition studies" that states that "the meaning of language is not some abstract propositional representation that resembles a verbal language. Rather, meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action in the material and social world."[1] While Gee's focus is primarily on first language acquisition among children, we have seen this theory extended to second language acquisition as well. Dwight Atkinson outlines basic principles for a sociocognitive approach to SLA beginning with the environment: "Language is learned in interaction, often with more capable social members. Classroom teachers are part of this group where second languages are concerned, but only a part—peers, mentors, role models, friends, family members and significant others can also fall into this category."[2] He also cites previous works emphasizing the active nature of language learning within this environment, where "…language and its acquisition from a sociocognitive perspective, would be seen in terms of 'action' and 'participation'—as providing extremely powerful semiotic means of performing and participating in activity-in-the-world."[3] Regardless of whether we are talking about first or second language acquisition, the basic principle remains consistent: language is the necessary tool for the language learner to complete tasked-based activities that require social interaction and collaboration in a "real world" environment.

Games and Simulations

While most of us agree with this in theory, creating the environment and tasks while covering the required material, keeping students motivated, and remaining on task can be daunting. Long before MMORPGs existed, teachers have used games and simulations to achieve these goals. There are many different types of simulations and games. Some involve technology, such as the text-based MUDs (multi-user domains) and MOOs (MUDs, object-oriented) used by language teachers in the past. Others such as the "virtual UN," mock trials, or role-playing games do not use technology at all.

Regardless of how the simulation is implemented, there are two basic criteria to keep in mind before considering its use in foreign language instruction. First, the students must have the sense of being immersed in a different environment. Second, the students must then be charged with accomplishing a goal that requires use of the target language. The benefit of such an environment is that language becomes a means to an end rather than a goal in itself. This type of instruction is often referred to as task-based learning, where tasks are defined as "activities that involve individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation."[4] Students then collaborate on the task in groups, creating a social environment and allowing the teacher to play the role of guide for each of the groups instead of the more traditional role of judging correct and incorrect for grammar and vocabulary. Simulations also do not focus solely on one aspect of the language. Instead, learners are motivated to use and master different linguistic patterns in order to succeed at a given task.

Simulations also allow for students to take an active role; "learning by doing" is another principal tenet of social cognitive theory. Students no longer expect to be given information from the teacher; instead, discovering information is a built-in aspect of the game. This is especially helpful for more introverted learners. Simulations have been shown to be less stressful for students than participating in a more traditional language-learning environment.[5] Simulations also foster the most useful form of interaction: a conversation without a predetermined outcome.[6] Through the game, students will discuss their own goals, then work to achieve them. The simulation allows this to happen within a framework that keeps the learners on task. This type of interaction among students has been shown to be beneficial. García-Carbonell, Montero, Rising and Watts point to studies at two universities in Spain which used telematic simulations where students were involved in a simulation over the internet to create an international forum of negotiation and debate in order to improve their English language skills. In both instances, the simulations showed that students attained a higher level of communicative language ability than in courses that did not use simulations.[7]

Games such as the World of Warcraft provide these benefits in addition to several advantages over more traditional simulations. One of these advantages is the presence of native speakers. Because the game creates different virtual worlds based on country, it is possible for students in the United States to enter the virtual World of Warcraft world in Germany, Spain, or France. This world is already populated with native speakers looking for others with whom they can collaborate on quests and adventures. This is a huge step toward creating an authentic virtual reality where the students are naturally immersed in the target language. Teachers also can enter this world and play the role of guide, introducing the students to other native speakers in the game and providing support when students become lost or frustrated. The result is a truly cooperative environment for language learning.

Another key benefit for commercial MMORPG games is the effect on student motivation. The game provides an opportunity for students to practice language skills within a system designed to provide feedback and demonstrate progress. Once students are introduced to the game in class, there is a very reasonable expectation that many of them will continue to play on their own. In his article "The Psychology of Massive Multi-User Online Role Playing Games," Nicholas Yee discusses the profile and patterns of a typical gamer. Yee found that the average MMORPG player spends almost 23 hours a week playing the game.[8] Yee also explored the social effect of spending this amount of time in a virtual environment and found that players become emotionally involved in the game and attached to the other players, forming platonic and romantic relationships that extend to the real world. We should also not assume that only younger male students would be interested in such a game. Indeed, the average age of a MMORPG player is 27[9] and women comprise 43 percent of the overall gaming market.[10] Given these facts, we can see how an MMORPG game could have a wide and general appeal among our students and provide them with a social environment in which to practice their target language. Given the amount of time many of these gamers spend in such an environment, learners introduced to such an environment could experience a dramatic increase in authentic input and communication, compared to what a more traditional classroom could offer on its own.

Modal Verbs and Second-Semester German

To give an idea of how this could work, I asked a second semester German student to be part of a lesson focusing on the modal verbs in German. After a traditional introduction involving conjugation and word order, she was sent home with basic instructions involving the World of Warcraft game and told to create a character within the fantasy world and familiarize herself with the game's basic functions (moving, chatting, etc). After some discussion, we decided to create characters of the Tauren race. For those not familiar with World of Warcraft, the Tauren are a "race" as are elves and dwarves. The story behind the Tauren and their imaginary culture borrow heavily from Native American history and legend. We both signed into the game. My character's name was Professor. My student chose the much more creative and humble name of WeedPicker. Our first step was then to decide on a quest that would also function as our task. I have bolded the modal verbs.

7/14 09:34:59.219 [Gruppe] Professor: Was **sollen** wir tun? (What should we do?)
7/14 09:35:16.656 [Gruppe] Professor: Hast du ein Quest? (Do you have a quest?)
7/14 09:37:26.408 [Gruppe] Weedpicker: Töten wir etwas (We kill something)
7/14 09:37:54.768 [Gruppe] Professor: Nur irgendetwas töten? (Just kill anything?)
7/14 09:37:59.596 [Gruppe] Professor: Wir **sollen**... (We should…)
7/14 09:38:14.487 [Gruppe] Weedpicker: wir **sollen** eine Quest finden? (We should find a Quest)
7/14 09:38:25.768 [Gruppe] Professor: Gut (Good)
7/14 09:39:38.066 [Gruppe] Professor: OK, dann **kannst** also mit diesem Mann reden. (OK, then you can speak with this man)
7/14 09:39:46.113 [Gruppe] Professor: Dann bitte das Quest mitteilen (then share the quest)

At this point my student clicked on a character controlled by the computer. She was greeted with an audio greeting in German and presented with two paragraphs of text describing a quest. In this case, it was a tribal elder offering us the chance to prove ourselves by gathering meat and feathers for the village.

7/14 09:39:49.269 Quest angenommen: Die Jagd geht weiter (We both receive notification that my student accepted the quest, "The hunt continues")

7/14 09:39:56.707 [Gruppe] Professor: Gut gemacht (Well done.)

7/14 09:40:22.973 [Gruppe] Professor: Hast du die Beschreibung gelesen und verstanden? (Have you read and understood the quest?)

7/14 09:41:44.333 [Gruppe] Weedpicker: ja, Ich verstande der Quest (Yes, I understoods the quest)

7/14 09:41:55.880 [Gruppe] Professor: ich verstehe... (I understand…)

7/14 09:42:04.834 [Gruppe] Professor: oder ich habe das Quest verstanden (or I have understood the quest)

7/14 09:42:13.693 [Gruppe] Professor: OK?

7/14 09:42:22.037 [Gruppe] Weedpicker: ok, Ich habe verstanden (I understood)

7/14 09:42:29.318 [Gruppe] Professor: Gut (Good)

7/14 09:42:41.365 [Gruppe] Professor: so, was **müssen** wir machen? (So, what do we have to do?)

7/14 09:43:36.085 [Gruppe] Weedpicker: wir brauchen zehn bergpumapelze (We need 10 mountain lion hides.)

This is just a small portion of the text but representative. For the next half hour or so we continued to text chat about where we should hunt, our progress, how best to hunt, etc. We played the game until our task was completed, in this case, the gathering of 10 feathers and meat from the hunt through collaboration and communication via text chat. When appropriate I tried to use modal verbs and encouraged my student to reply in complete sentences. However, it is important to note that having the focus on task as opposed to the grammar forced her at times to reach to try other grammatical forms. Having just started her second semester, my student has not been formally introduced to the past tense. Using a German/English dictionary that is running on her machine, she quickly looks up a few words and attempts the phrase, "I have understood." Since we have not covered past tense yet, I simply correct her then continue with the game. The focus stays on the task at hand.

Once we complete the quest, our session is over. However, it is important to tie these activities back into the class and give students a chance to correct their errors. As a warm up, I would ask the class what they thought of the quest, then display parts of the transcript. Students would then work in groups to find any errors and correct them, giving them a chance to reinforce the grammatical rule while maintaining the social and goal-oriented environment of the classroom.

Getting Started

I hope I have given a general idea of a lesson involving World of Warcraft that is flexible enough to accommodate beginning-to-intermediate level students. There are some issues to consider:

- Not every student is going to fall in love with the idea of playing games as homework. Instructors need to emphasize that the game, like any homework, is practice ground for what is being taught in class with the advantages mentioned above.

- There is a cost involved. Each student would require a subscription of $15 per month. Over the course of a semester, this would amount to roughly the same cost as that of a workbook.

- I would like to point out that playing the role of "guide" is an ideal task for a teaching assistant. It does not require nearly as much experience in lesson design and classroom management as a traditional classroom. Rather, it provides an environment where the tasks, roles, and goals are already set. The guide only has to point the students in the right direction, and provide corrections or help when necessary.

If you decide that World of Warcraft is worth a try, you will need the following to get started:

- The European version of World of Warcraft. I received mine through UK Ebay.

- World of Warcraft language packs. http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/faq/elp.html;jsessionid=B1CF006B3B38741A7AA7DC6C2E60DB49.app18 Each

language then has its own executable file. I then delete the English version .exe.

- World of Warcraft requires regular updates as the world expands. These downloads use peer-to-peer BitTorrent technology, and they may be blocked by your school's firewall or packet shaper. You can receive the updates the old fashioned way from sites such as FilePlanet. Note, this also means you cannot simply "freeze" a machine until the end of the semester since World of Warcraft will be receiving updates on a roughly weekly basis.

- /chatlog is the command to save your text chats.

- If the students are going to enter the world as a group with a TA, you may wish to them speak with each other while playing game through an audio messenger such as Skype. This will allow them to speak instead of text chat and create a private channel from the other online players. If you have a large group, the best free option would probably be to set up a skypecast. Skypecasting is a free service offered by Skype that allows a moderator to invite a fairly large number of guests to an online discussion. It is still in beta. You can find more information here: https://skypecasts.skype.com/skypecasts/home

Depending on your situation, you may want to consider other games. If the updates and monthly fee are an issue, take a look at Guild Wars. Guild Wars is similar to World of Warcraft, though less extensive. The virtual environment grows by purchasing expansion packs that function as well by themselves. This is unlike the World of Warcraft model where updates are added each month as a "free" and required download in exchange for the monthly fee. It provides different languages including German, French, and Italian along with the ability to choose a European server. That being said, I have not had much chance to play the game myself. Though Guild Wars states that they try to place players according to language, the boundary does not appear to be as distinct as it is in World of Warcraft where each language has its own server. Before you start with a class, be sure to play some in the target language and check that the environment of the game is not a mix of numerous European languages. If you teach Japanese, you will need a different game, though you should have no shortage of options. Final Fantasy is the most well known along with Ultima Online, though again, make sure you are getting the Japanese version with the ability to connect to servers in Japan.

Looking only at the cover of most video games, one would certainly not jump to the conclusion that they have a place in a rigorous academic curriculum. However, foreign languages are uniquely flexible. If the game provides authentic language content and requires communication in order to progress through the game—and our students are willing to spend hours of their time immersed in this environment—we can greatly increase not only their overall exposure to the language but their motivation to learn as well.

NOTES

1. James Paul Gee, "Reading as situated language: A sociocognitive perspective," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 44:8 (May 2001): pp. 714-715.

2. Dwight Atkinson, "Toward a Sociocognitive Approach to Second Language Acquisition," *The Modern Language Journal* 86:4 (2002): p. 536.

3. See Barbara Rogoff, *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Barbara Rogoff, "Cognition as a Collaborative Process" in D. Kuhn & R.S. Siegler (Eds.) *Handbook of Child Psychology*, *Vol 2: Cognition, Perception, and Language,* 5th Edition (New York: Wiley, 1998): pp. 679-744; Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

4. Amparo García-Carbonell, Begoña Montero, Beverly Rising and Frances Watts, "Simulation/Gaming and the Acquisition of Communicative Competence in Another Language," *Simulation & Gaming* 32:4 (2001): p. 483.

5. See Howard Rose, *Design and construction of a virtual environment for Japanese language instruction* (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Washington, Seattle, 1996); Howard Rose and Mark Billinghurst, "Zengo Sayu: An immersive educational environment for learning Japanese," *Technical Report* No. 4-95 (Seattle: Human Interface Technology Laboratory, University of Washington, 1995). (Both studies cited in K. Schwienhorst, "Why Virtual, Why Environments? Implementing Virtual Reality Concepts in Computer Assisted Language Learning," *Simulation & Gaming* 23:2 (2002): p. 201.) See also Robin Scarcella and David Crookall, "Simulation/Gaming and Language Acquisition," In D. Crookall & R. Oxford (Eds.), *Simulation, Gaming and Language Learning* (New York: Newbury House, 1990), pp. 223-238. (Cited in T.G. Saliés, "Promoting Strategic Competence: What Simulations Can Do for You," *Simulation and Gaming* 33:3 (2002): p. 282.)

6. Amparo García-Carbonell, Begoña Montero, Beverly Rising and Frances Watts, "Simulation/Gaming and the Acquisition of Communicative Competence in Another Language," *Simulation & Gaming* 32:4 (2001): p. 486.

7. Amparo García-Carbonell, Begoña Montero Fleta, Beverly Rising and Frances Watts, "Simulation/Gaming and the Acquisition of Communicative Competence in Another Language," *Simulation & Gaming* 32:4 (2001): p. 487.

8. Nicholas Yee, "The Psychology of Massively Multi-User Online Role-Playing Games: Motivations, Emotional Investment, Relationships and Problematic Usage," to appear in R. Schroder & A. Axelson (Eds.), *Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* (London: Springer Verlag, 2006): p. 9.

9. Nicholas Yee, "The Psychology of Massively Multi-User Online Role-Playing Games: Motivations, Emotional Investment, Relationships and Problematic Usage," to appear in R. Schroder & A. Axelson (Eds.), *Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* (London: Springer Verlag, 2006): pp. 9,10,15,25.

10. Christine Cook, "Heading the Girl Game Revolution," Christine Cook, http://www.peachpit.com Article accessed 9/3/06 at http://www.peachpit.com/articles/printerfriendly.asp?p=424448