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Affordances for second language learning in World of Warcraft

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Abstract

What are the affordances of online gaming environments for second language learning and socialization? To answer this question, this qualitative study examines two college-age Spanish learners’ experiences participating in the Spanish language version of the massively multi-player online game World of Warcraft. Using data culled from participant observation, interviews, logs of in-game chat, and student journal entries, we describe how the design of the game, cultural norms for its use, and participants’ own abilities interact to afford distinct opportunities for language learning for these two students. Discussion focuses on how online games might be used for language teaching and learning in ways that take full advantage of the medium’s affordances for both experienced and inexperienced players.

Key words: language learning, video games, technology, education, computer-mediated communication
1 Introduction

Language instructors have long sought to leverage advances in technology for second language (L2) learning (Warschauer, 1996; 1997). Among new technologies, video games and virtual worlds are seen as offering especially rich potential for providing language development opportunities (see, e.g., Gee, 2007). Research to date on the use of virtual environments and online games in language learning has found benefits ranging from increased student motivation and engagement (Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008; Thorne, Black & Sykes, 2009; Zheng, Young, Wagner & Brewer, 2009), to enhanced vocabulary use (Bytheway, 2011; Rankin, Morrison, McNeal, Gooch, & Shute, 2009), to expanded opportunities for intercultural communication (Thorne, 2008).

In recent years, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) have gained particular attention among language acquisition researchers (see, e.g., Bytheway, 2011; Purushotma, 2005; Rankin, Gold & Gooch, 2006; Rankin, Morrison, McNeal, Gooch & Shute, 2009; Thorne, 2008; Zhao & Lai, 2008; other articles in this special issue). MMOGs are immersive, graphically rich 3D environments in which many players from geographically distinct locations can navigate the game space and interact via digital characters known as avatars, thus offering the opportunity for a great deal of informal, contextualized interaction in a learner’s target language, including interaction with native speakers.

In this article we focus on MMOGs, and the game World of Warcraft (WoW) in particular, to answer the question: What affordances for language development and socialization might such spaces offer? To do so, we use qualitative methods to analyze data from a case study of one college-age Spanish learner who was an experienced gamer, and contrast his experiences with those of another Spanish learner who was new to gaming, as they play in a Spanish language version of WoW.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Sociocultural theory and second language acquisition

A sociocultural approach to learning emphasizes the contextually situated and mediated nature of mental activity (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, language development arises from the learner’s interactions with other people and the social context, and is mediated by symbolic (e.g., language, image) as well as material tools and technologies. In this article, a sociocultural approach draws attention to the various opportunities for language learning that are afforded by the gaming environment. The notion of affordance, defined as the opportunities for learning or interaction provided by a context in relation to the abilities of the learner (based on van Lier’s (2000) discussion of affordances) is akin to Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, as both concepts emphasize the interplay between a learner’s capabilities and the learning environment. Thus, when we discuss affordances in this article, the unit of analysis is not merely the affordances of the environment or an individual learner’s discrete linguistic input or output, but rather the “active learner” (van Lier, 2000: 253) and his or her interactions within the learning context.
2.2 Affordances in games for language learning

Researchers on MMOGs propose that these spaces afford learners opportunities to develop language and literacy skills, as players form game communities and create and develop interpersonal relationships (Peterson, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2007; Thorne, 2008). MMOGs are believed to foster enjoyable, collaborative play between diverse groups of players, motivating language learners to persist in communicative activity (Nardi, Ly & Harris, 2007). Peterson (2010) identifies several advantages of MMOGs for achieving this goal. These include, “access to diverse groups of interlocutors, including native speakers; extensive opportunities for purposeful target language use in an engaging context; opportunities to participate in co-construction, negotiation, and the development of communicative competence; and development of collaborative and social relationships” (op. cit.: 432). For example, Steinkuehler’s (2007) study found that during game play in the context of Lineage II, a well-known MMOG, players participated in a variety of language and literacy practices such as letter writing, oral delivery of narratives and poetry, and debate. According to Steinkuehler, participation in these ways served to build interpersonal relationships and community in the online game space. As another example, Thorne’s (2008) examination of an intercultural communicative exchange between two WoW gamers illustrates how the goal directed nature of MMOG activity can motivate language learning. The individuals in Thorne’s study were not necessarily seeking to learn a language; rather, they sought to work together to accomplish a task, which required commitment, collaboration, and communicative negotiation of meaning. This study also highlights how popular MMOGs like WoW create opportunities for multilingual communication, as players on European game servers come from linguistically diverse backgrounds (see, also, Thorne, 2010).

Several studies have found that participation in MMOGs can help improve learners’ second language vocabulary (Bytheway, 2011; Rankin et al., 2006; Rankin et al., 2009). In Bytheway’s study (2011) of Non-Native English Speakers (NNES), participants identified full immersion in the English version of WoW as particularly beneficial for their language learning because the game required active negotiation of meaning in the game world with online interactants via the target language. Rankin et al. (2006) similarly found that English as a Second Language (ESL) students who played the game Ever Quest 2 increased their English vocabulary skills.

It has also been hypothesized that MMOGs afford learners opportunities to build confidence and increase language experimentation. Peterson (2010) suggests that MMOGs allow for role playing and risk taking by language learners as well as reduce inhibition in target language interaction. This is evident in a study by Reinders and Wattana (2011), who found that ESL learners were not only willing to communicate in the MMOG Ragnarok online, but also demonstrated increased interaction via text and voice chat in successive gaming sessions. In another study (Zheng, Young, Brewer, & Wagner, 2009), researchers observed that NNESs playing Quest Atlantis exhibited increased confidence in their English language ability and also developed positive attitudes towards English language learning. Zhao and Lai (2008) explain that through anonymity in game play, players are less inhibited and more freely experiment with language to accomplish game objectives. The social
relationships that are formed and strengthened through collaborative play may also be beneficial for language learning. As an example, Rankin and colleagues (2009) examined interactions between native- and non-native speakers of English in *Ever Quest 2*, finding that as non-native speakers increased their comfort level with online interactants, they produced more chat in the game and acquired more vocabulary.

### 2.3 Games as affinity spaces for learning

A common thread throughout the literature is that MMOGs encourage experimentation and interaction among players. Through the course of activity in MMOGs, players form interpersonal relationships based on shared interests. Gee (2004) describes this coalescing of individuals around a shared interest as an *affinity space*. Gee outlines the criteria that define affinity spaces, many of which are abundantly found in video games. These include shared interest, distributed knowledge, nondiscriminatory affiliations between players (of different skill levels, linguistic background, races, gender, and socioeconomic status), and multiple routes for meaningful participation. As we will discuss in the upcoming analysis, MMOGs like *WoW* are affinity spaces that, through the aforementioned features, have the potential to facilitate L2 development in ways that may complement and extend the learning that goes on in language classrooms.

In summary, research suggests that MMOGs may offer a range of affordances for L2 learning due to the engaging communicative contexts of these environments. Play in these affinity spaces requires collaborative interaction, which in turn is mediated by meaningful target language use. From a sociocultural perspective, these interactions, often with more capable others, may provide opportunities for learners to build on their existing competencies in a supportive and engaging context.

### 3 Research design

#### 3.1 Study context: World of Warcraft

Modern MMOGs such as *WoW* are persistent virtual worlds, where players interact in task-based, socially driven gameplay. In *WoW*, players choose avatars from among different classes and races of characters and play out adventures in a fantasy setting (à la Tolkien). Communication in these games takes place primarily in synchronous chat channels, while some game scenarios encourage the use of third-party voice communication software (see, Chen, 2009 for examples of communication in MMOGs). MMOGs encourage cooperative play, where groups of players band together in ‘parties’ to defeat strong enemies. Larger groups of players who share the same interests often form persistent groups (guilds), sharing knowledge and expertise with fellow guild members with whom they become socially invested.

With over 11 million subscribed users, *WoW* is currently the most popular MMOG available. This expansive user base is a testament to *WoW*’s mass appeal and worldwide commercial success. *WoW* is constantly updated through patches and expansions that add content and features to the game. For players, this translates into a game narrative that is continually developing, giving incentive to play long after the initial release of the game. Players who have attained the highest levels are able to further advance through
these patches and expansions (e.g., in *WoW*, three subsequent expansions raised the highest level attainable from 60-70-80, and finally to 85).

### 3.2 Data collection

Data was collected from L2 Spanish learners who were enrolled in Spanish classes during the Spring of 2010 at a four-year university in Southern California. Six participants, four males and two females, of varying levels of Spanish language ability and familiarity with *WoW*, were recruited for the study. Two of the participants were defined as high-beginner language learners, enrolled in the second quarter of a 1-year language course sequence, two were defined as intermediate language learners, enrolled in the first and second quarter of the second year of the course sequence, and two were defined as high-intermediate and advanced, enrolled in the first quarter of the third year of the course sequence. Three males were experienced *WoW* players, and one male and two females were new to the game.

At an initial meeting organized by the first author, participants were given a Spanish language copy of *WoW*, were familiarized with basic game mechanics (i.e., player movement, quests, items, etc.) and were shown how to install the chat log addon *Elephant* to record game text chat. Participants were also instructed to copy and paste the chat text to a Google document for purposes of later analysis. One participant had difficulty using the add-on for recording in-game chat, so chat data for that participant is limited to recordings from other participants’ logs. During this meeting, participants were asked to play the game over the course of a seven-week period. They were free to play *WoW* at their discretion, though they were encouraged to play an average of five hours per week. They were also encouraged to write a short journal entry after each game session detailing their experience, though this was not required. In addition, participants met with the first author three times (every two weeks) for semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately twenty minutes. The purpose of the interviews was to understand their game play experience, how they interacted with other people and challenges they encountered either in the game or while interacting with other players in the space, as well as how they perceived their language proficiency to be developing. These meetings were recorded and transcribed. Thus, data from each participant includes a combination of self-recorded chat logs or chat captured in the logs of other participants, journal entries, and transcribed semi-structured interviews.

The first author, an experienced gamer and advanced Spanish speaker, acted as a participant-observer (Spradley, 1980) throughout the study. During the first weeks of the study, most participants logged on and formed a party, in which the first author, study participants, and players not affiliated with the study would interact online. The first author collected field notes during these interactions. These notes captured the general nature of field interactions with and between players, highlighting the challenges and successes of participants during play. In terms of analysis, as avid *WoW* players (author 1: Level 80; author 2: Level 60), L2 Spanish speakers, and language and literacy instructors, the authors are uniquely positioned as insiders, understanding the intricacies of participation and interaction within the game space.
3.3 Data analysis

The initial stages of analysis involved a qualitative, inductive process aimed at identifying patterns in participants’ language use and in their interactions in the chat logs (e.g., type of utterances, length of pauses between utterances, and role that participants play in exchanges) and changes over time. This stage of analysis also included identifying themes that emerged in participants’ journal entries and interview transcripts (e.g., aspects of the game that participants perceived as difficult, enjoyable, helpful; references to language ability, and language use). During this process, the notion of affordances for language learning and socialization became salient in the data. Therefore, in subsequent analysis, we took a theoretically-informed, deductive approach to coding and looked for particular examples of, and references to, affordances for language learning in the data. During this stage of analysis, we identified three affordances that build upon and further elaborate those that have been described in the existing literature: *World of Warcraft* (1) allows for and supports the creation of safe learning and languaging spaces, (2) emphasizes communicative competence, or the ability to communicate meaningfully and effectively within a given context, and (3) promotes goal-directed, collaborative action between experts and novices. We then reviewed the data for examples of participants’ positive, negative, and neutral experiences with these affordances to understand the potential that they might offer in terms of language teaching and learning.

3.4 Focal participants

This article focuses attention on one participant, Emilio, who is a beginning Spanish learner but an expert gamer, and contrasts his experiences with those of Silvania, an advanced Spanish learner but a novice gamer (* all names are pseudonyms). Emilio was selected as a focal participant based on two criteria: language ability and gaming experience. Emilio is in his second quarter of Spanish. Although his placement scores indicate that he is a high-beginner, he feels that his Spanish skills are barely on par with this classification. This level of language ability is sufficient for accessing the basic language of the game (e.g., basic command of pronouns, verb conjugation, sentence structure, prepositions, and introductory vocabulary), while at the same time leaving a great deal of room for the development of communicative competence. In terms of gaming ability, Emilio had experience playing *Wow* in English before the latest two expansions to the game. During that time, Emilio had a level 60 character (the highest level possible in that version of the game) and participated in large 40-player dungeons known commonly as raids. The selection of an experienced gamer as a focal participant allowed for a focus on the participant’s struggles with the L2 rather than the mechanics of the game.

By contrast, Silvania is an advanced Spanish language learner, and completely new to *Wow*. While not quite a heritage Spanish speaker, Spanish was spoken in her home. As an advanced Spanish learner, Silvania has good oral communication skills, but she describes her writing ability as in need of improvement. While we do not focus in depth on Silvania as a participant, we draw from her interviews and journal excerpts to provide a starting point for understanding how individuals with distinct
gaming and language abilities might respond to the affordances discussed in this article, and what the implications of these differing responses might be for MMOGs and language learning. Thus, we chose to focus on these two participants because they present the most marked contrast in terms of their affinity for and experience with video games (Emilio=High affinity, expert vs. Silvania=Low affinity, beginner) as well as their language ability (Emilio=beginner vs. Silvania=Advanced). This is an important aspect of the analysis and discussion, as the affordances of an environment are directly tied to the capacities of the individuals interacting in that environment (Varela, Thompson & Rosch cited in van Lier, 2000).

4 Findings

The following analysis charts Emilio’s trajectory as he starts out in a beginner’s guild that allows him to enjoy the game in a low risk setting, then moves on to authentic L2 social interaction in a higher stakes Spanish language guild affinity space, and finally ends with successful participation and interaction in a highly competitive Spanish language guild. The excerpts from Emilio’s chat logs and journal entries are illustrative of key affordances for language development and socialization that were identified in the WoW environment. It is important to note that in our analysis of the data, we identified multiple affordances that are aligned with the advantages for language learning described in other game-based research, such as a low-anxiety setting, multiple routes for and modes of communication, expert-novice interaction, immersion in the target language, and access to native speakers (Peterson, 2010; Rankin et al., 2006; Rankin et al., 2009; Thorne, 2008). However, in this article we focus primarily on affordances that merit additional discussion vis-à-vis the aforementioned research. It is also worth noting that although the data are presented as illustrations of specific affordances, there is considerable overlap in affordances that were identified in each of the data excerpts we discuss below; the single-affordance organizing categories were selected for clarity and to highlight key differences between our findings and those of other studies.

4.1 Allows for the formation of safe learning and languaging spaces

A key affordance that emerged during analysis was how the WoW environment facilitated the creation of safe learning and languaging spaces. In his review of hypothesized advantages of games for language learning, Peterson (2010) identifies related affordances of the game, such as “community formation” and the “development of collaborative social relationships” (op. cit.: 432); however, these advantages do not explicitly address the role that the game interface plays in creating these collaborative spaces, nor do they explicitly address the notion of comfort and safety for players. As an illustration of how WoW facilitated the creation of safe learning and languaging spaces, during the first 1.5 weeks of the study, all study participants were members of an introductory guild called Luzsagrada in which they could learn basic game mechanics in a low anxiety setting with other Spanish language learners from the university Spanish classes. To clarify, a guild is a mechanism by which hundreds of players can form a persistent affiliation within WoW (i.e., it persists even after logging off). Guilds (as well
As smaller collections of players known as parties or groups) have a private chat channel that is separate from general chat. Because the general chat channel is open to large numbers of players engaged in a wide range of activities, interactions can be somewhat chaotic and difficult to follow. Conversely, guild (and certainly group and party channels) usually have fewer interlocutors at any given time, thereby reducing the number of topics and making the conversational strands easier to follow. The guild chat channel is also beneficial in that it provides a measure of accountability for one’s utterances, as a member can be kicked out of a guild for interacting in an offensive manner. Guilds also provide an easy means of locating known others, because the interface automatically provides an aural and textual alert when other members of the guild log on to the game.

Analyzing an excerpt from Emilio’s first journal entry illuminates how he and other guild members interacted in the early stages of their gameplay.

**JOURNAL EXCERPT 1**

Emilio’s journal entry at the beginning of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Hoy yo fui a las mazmorras con Silvania y Picarico…</td>
<td>Today I went to a lot of dungeons with Silvania and Picarico.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Entonces fuimos a Bosque de Elwynn para ensenar Silvania a colectar plantas para herboristería y inscripción.</td>
<td>Then we went to Elwynn Forest to teach Silvania to collect plants for Herbalism and Inscription.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Era divertido.</td>
<td>That was fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Me parece que cuando estoy con Picarico o con Silvania me siento bien, pero esto es porque siento comfortable si necesitoles preguntosobre español.</td>
<td>It seems that when I am with Picarico or with Silvania I feel good, but this is because I feel comfortable if I need I ask them about Spanish.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noting that although Emilio is a beginning Spanish speaker and Silvania was categorized as advanced, the game affinity space allows for multiple forms of participation that are not based on language ability. Therefore, Emilio was able to balance his uncertainty as a novice Spanish speaker with his expertise as a gamer and play an important role as a WoW guide for other members of the guild. In the first two lines of his journal entry, Emilio subtly and explicitly indexes his identity as an experienced WoW player. For example, he begins in Line 1 by mentioning that he, Picarico, and Silvania visited many dungeons that day. Dungeons are specialized parts of the game world that feature more powerful adversaries and more lucrative rewards than the general game environment. Because dungeons are more challenging, they often require players to group together and make multiple attempts to complete a given quest. While an inexperienced WoW player might spend a majority of time exploring the general game space and completing less-challenging, introductory quests, Emilio leads the other players in their exploration of the more challenging dungeons. In Line 2, Emilio again is able to establish his expert status when he writes about teaching Silvania to collect plants for the Herbalism and Inscription professions.

Interestingly, the language learning aspects of this activity do not play a prominent role in the excerpt. Instead, each of the lines foregrounds either enjoyable aspects of gameplay, social interaction, and/or positive affect. Emilio’s status as a Spanish
learner is not mentioned until the final line of the entry, suggesting that in this case, 
*WoW* provided an engaging, low-anxiety setting in which Emilio was able to explore 
the Spanish language version of the game, while still enjoying interaction with others 
and gameplay. Moreover, the guild provided a safe space in which Silvania, the more 
proficient Spanish speaker but less experienced gamer, was able to experiment with 
navigating the game and benefit from another guild member’s expertise. According 
to Silvania, “being in a group makes communication easier and more convenient and 
also makes the game less lonely” (interview, 2010). Such data indicate that the guild 
and group functions of the game may afford opportunities for learners of varying 
levels to collaboratively use language to accomplish tasks and teach and learn from 
each other in a safe environment.

Data also suggest, however, some challenges associated with this affordance. For 
example, in her journal, Silvania relates her disappointment at logging onto the game 
and finding none of her friends online to play with. She also conveys challenges that 
she had even when playing with other guild members when she writes,”i thought i 
was getting the hang of the game, until i joined the ‘hermandad’ in what i think were 
missions. I was confused about 80% of the time. But it was fun. Until the end, when i 
had no idea what anyone was asking of me” (journal entry, 2010). Thus, while there 
is evidence to suggest that playing in groups is fun and comfortable for participants, 
there are also challenges associated with not clearly understanding game objectives 
even while in groups with native speakers, not understanding requests from 
native speakers during group tasks, and not being able to find known others with 
whom to group.

### 4.2 Emphasizes communicative competence

Another key affordance that emerged in the analysis was how the gaming environ-
ment *emphasizes communicative competence*. Forms of communicative competence 
emphasized in MMOG play are closely associated with sociolinguistic (i.e., knowing 
how and what to say to whom, and when) and strategic competence (e.g., repair 
strategies, turn-taking strategies, etc.) described by Canale and Swain (1980). Play in 
MMOGs favors these forms of communicative competence, which places emphasis 
on contextualized meaning rather than grammatical and lexical correctness of 
standard language forms. While Peterson’s (2010) review identifies similar hypo-
thesized advantages of games for language learning, such as “extensive opportunities 
for purposeful TL use and reuse in an authentic and engaging communicative 
context” and “opportunities to engage in co-construction, negotiation, and the 
development of communicative competence” (*op. cit.*: 432), our notion of this 
affordance highlights how the gaming context leads to cultural norms for language 
use and interaction that contribute to an explicit emphasis on communicative 
competence. This affordance was particularly salient in Emilio’s interactions with 
other players via chat. To illustrate, in the second week of gameplay, study participants 
were introduced into *Bananeros*, a well-known guild on the Spanish server with many 
guild members from across Latin America who communicate almost exclusively in 
Spanish. Much of Emilio’s early participation in the new guild chat consisted of non-
descript bids for interaction through short utterances such as greetings and expressions
of appreciation (e.g., “grats”, an abbreviation for congratulations). However, within the context of the shared guild space, these utterances were sufficient for establishing rapport with other members of the guild, which then allowed Emilio to engage in slightly more robust communicative exchanges with these players. The following excerpt, from week 5 of gameplay, highlights how Emilio builds on his early bidding strategy and begins to develop communicative competence and establish his identity within this new context.

**GUILD CHAT EXCERPT 1**

Emilio begins to participate in guild discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>User</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18:12:30</td>
<td>[Magabanal]</td>
<td>[Yelmo de cuero de Gladiador furioso]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:12:30</td>
<td>[Magabanal]</td>
<td>[Leather Helm of the Furious Gladiator]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:12:43</td>
<td>[Emilio]</td>
<td>eso es muy bien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:12:48</td>
<td>[Magabanal]</td>
<td>=F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:12:58</td>
<td>[Magabanal]</td>
<td>pero me falta poner mejores gems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:13:00</td>
<td>[Magabanal]</td>
<td>(</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:13:06</td>
<td>[Magabanal]</td>
<td>no tengo oro x hacer full BG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:13:11</td>
<td>[Emilio]</td>
<td>lol</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** [Leather Helm of the Furious Gladiator] in Line A. refers to a powerful piece of armor that players can obtain by defeating other players in ranked battles. It appears in brackets and in English because the text is automatically inserted into the chat window when the player presses a specific combination of keyboard keys and selects the item.

In Line B, Emilio comments on another guild member’s recent acquisition of a powerful piece of equipment. It is worth noting that it takes Emilio a full thirteen seconds to decide whether or not to participate in the discussion. In spite of the delay, by expressing his approval of the equipment, Emilio is able to establish his expertise as a gamer through his ability to distinguish between high and low level equipment. Then, he does not re-enter conversation for another eighteen seconds, when he simply uses the acronym “lol” (laugh out loud) to express that he finds the conversation humorous and to demonstrate his active participation and interest in this exchange. Although a great deal of SLA research has likened synchronous chat systems to conversational exchanges (see, e.g., Kern, 1995; Pellettieri, 2000), it is important to note that communicative competence in the context of WoW guild chat differs from face to face communication in significant ways. First and foremost, because players can participate in guild chat while they are still actively engaged in navigating the game world, interactants generally recognize that chatting is secondary to any game action in which a player might be engaged. Thus, while a significant pause might seem out of place in a face to face conversation or even in another form of synchronous chat, it is a perfectly acceptable aspect of WoW guild chat, as conversations may be interrupted while players battle wayward beasts or stop to gather herbs with healing properties. Along similar lines, even native speaker gamers use abbreviated and orthographically and stylistically non-standard language, in addition to simple typographical errors, often because they are attending to multiple and simultaneous
activities within the game. For language learners, this affords valuable leeway for pauses to formulate utterances and inculcates an acceptance of errors, qualities that may facilitate the performance of communicative competence within this context.

In spite of the community emphasis on communicative competence, favoring function over form, our data suggests that not all language learners take advantage of this affordance. For example, observations of Silvania’s participation in groups revealed that she made limited contributions to the group chat, and these tended to be in complete, grammatically correct utterances. Her participation via the voice program *Ventrilo* showed similar patterns. Interestingly, although Silvania’s participation in text and voice chat was limited, her journal entries indicate that she perceived communication via these media as opportunity and motivation for improving both her speaking and writing skills. In addition, in the following interview excerpt, she describes how immersion in these media fosters her language use when she writes, “I’m more likely to go on and like, actually go on and still kind of maybe speak Spanish or kinda be thinking in Spanish for awhile afterward” (2010). Thus, even though observations suggest that Silvania’s communication was limited within the game, she perceived the various communication channels as an affordance for her language development.

4.3 Promotes goal-directed, collaborative action between experts and novices

A third affordance that emerged in the data was how the *WoW* context promotes goal-directed, collaborative action between experts and novices. This refers to both expert and novice Spanish speakers, as well as expert and novice gamers. Peterson’s (2010) review identifies a related affordance in how games provide “access to diverse groups of interlocutors, including native speakers” (*op. cit.*: 432); however, our analysis suggests that there may be an important affordance for language learning that goes beyond access to varied interlocutors to include how the game space provides multiple contexts in which experts and novices interact, which opens up opportunities for collaboration between less and more experienced gamers and language users. Moreover, our data suggest that this affordance had distinct implications for participants’ identities both as Spanish speakers and as gamers. As an illustration, at this point in the study, Emilio’s communicative competence has improved somewhat, and he has achieved significant success in the game, as evidenced by the level of his character (80, which was the highest level possible) and his membership in a highly competitive and high status raiding guild. A raid is a large group (usually ten or more) of players grouped together to defeat a particularly powerful creature in the game. Emilio’s membership in such a guild is significant because raiding requires not only skill with the game mechanics, but also with using language to coordinate a great deal of fast-paced activity during the raid.

In the following excerpt, we see further evidence of Emilio’s success within the game, as another player seeks him out to help with “the daily,” or repeatable quests that guild members complete each day to gather supplies and money that the guild needs for raiding.
It is worth noting here that Emilio’s journal entries suggest that his enjoyment of *WoW* is mediated by his social interactions and subsequent success within the game. Although he has not made drastic improvements in his Spanish ability since the beginning of the study, this exchange highlights advancements in his communicative competence and strategies that he uses to maintain rapport. For example, Emilio quickly and affirmatively responds to Jodal’s request to do the daily. Moreover, he indexes his status as an experienced and knowledgeable member of the group by qualifying his agreement with the addition of “lol,” which serves as a humorous way of marking the tedious nature of these daily quests. In order to keep conversation flowing, Emilio uses simple utterances, such as “hahaha.” This strategy also allows Emilio to take a little more time to respond with a joke in line G when he suggests that Jodal will likely fall asleep before he is able to complete the daily. Notice that Jodal, a native Spanish speaker, continues conversation at a much more natural pace, with pauses no longer than the time it takes to type his responses. However, Emilio has developed strategies that allow him to maintain normal conversation patterns, while also creating time for him to come up with meaningful contributions to conversation. This excerpt is an apt illustration of how the focus on goal-directed, collaborative action (in this case, working together to complete the daily for the good of the guild) affords opportunity for Emilio to interact with a native Spanish speaker, not only in this chat exchange, but also when they or their avatars head out together to complete the daily.

In Excerpt 4, we see another illustration of how the guild space provides a point of connection and a shared purpose that promotes interactions between Emilio and a native Spanish speaker who is a less experienced gamer. In spite of his limited language skills, Emilio is able to take on a mentorship role in this exchange. To provide some context for the excerpt, when guild members appear online, other

| A) 07:19:36 [Jodal]: Emilio | A) 07:19:36 [Jodal]: Emilio |
| B) 07:19:54 [Emilio]: heyo | B) 07:19:54 [Emilio]: hey |
| C) 07:20:00 [Jodal]: hacemos al diaria? | C) 07:20:00 [Jodal]: (want to) do the daily? |
| D) 07:20:06 [Emilio]: si lol | D) 07:20:06 [Emilio]: yes lol |
| E) 07:20:17 [Jodal]: dale cuando acabes en winter me avisas | E) 07:20:17 [Jodal]: (let’s go) when you finish in (Wintergrasp) let me know |
| F) 07:20:22 [Emilio]: jeje | F) 07:20:22 [Emilio]: haha |
| G) 07:20:35 [Emilio]: parece que estara durmiendo en dos horas | G) 07:20:35 [Emilio]: it seems that (you) will be sleeping in two hours |
| H) 07:20:39 [Jodal]: no hay prisa ando pescando | H) 07:20:39 [Jodal]: there’s no rush I’m fishing |
| I) 07:21:40 [Jodal]: ando sacando peces para icc10 del grupo 3 | I) 07:21:40 [Jodal]: I’m catching fish for ICC 10 group 3 |
| J) 07:21:54 [Emilio]: ah ok | J) 07:21:54 [Emilio]: ah ok |
| K) 07:22:01 [Jodal]: oye | K) 07:22:01 [Jodal]: (hey) |
| L) 07:22:10 [Jodal]: tu puedes raidear de 9 a 11 o 12? | L) 07:22:10 [Jodal]: can you raid from 9 to 11 or 12? |
| M) 07:22:12 [Emilio]: soloemente estoy subiendo habilidade con pescando | M) 07:22:12 [Emilio]: I’m just raising my fishing skill |
players are alerted to this fact by a user-interface pop up announcing that the guild member has logged onto the game. Draliana, a player who has just logged on, is greeted by Emilio in the guild chat channel, and they proceed to have a conversation about a specific quest.

**GUILD CHAT EXCERPT 4**

Emilio displays expertise

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21:48:50</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>hola Draliana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:49:15</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>hola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:49:37</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>que pasa?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:49:47</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>estas matando lord everblaze?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:49:57</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>no mucho, solo esperando q me de lo q tira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:50:05</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>se glicheo por mi lag y no me lo quiere dar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:50:12</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>ya lo mate 4 veces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:50:13</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>lol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:50:19</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>lo siento</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:50:38</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>me choca, pero ya sabes lo q dicen la 5ta es la vencida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:50:59</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>al parecer no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:51:31</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>5ta?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:51:34</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>jej</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:51:40</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>que es 5ta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:51:47</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>alguien para [For The Alliance!]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:51:52</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>si!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:51:55</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>mio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:52:00</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>quinta vez q trato de matarlo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:52:24</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>matar lord everblaze?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:52:34</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>si hahahahahaha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:52:40</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>en serio?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:52:40</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>uhh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:52:44</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>voy a tener q tratar maniana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:04</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>a matar lord everblaze? uhh creo que es muy facil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:21</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>ya lo mate 6 veces lol pero no me da el fuego</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:29</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>oh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:31</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>umm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:33</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>alguien quiere ir a [For The Alliance!]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:37</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>debes abandoner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:38</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>el mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:43</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>y aceptar otra vez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:47</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>ouch esta bn lejos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:53:54</td>
<td>Emilio</td>
<td>despues debe esta bien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21:54:03</td>
<td>Draliana</td>
<td>ojala</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---
This excerpt reveals Emilio’s growing familiarity with vocabulary, expressions, and phrases that facilitate effective communication in this space. For example, he uses brief phrases, such as “¿que pasa?/ What’s up?” and “lo siento/ I’m sorry” to engage Draliana in conversation, as well as terms that are relevant to gameplay, such as “misión/ quest” to convey meaningful information. In lines L and N, this exchange also provides an opportunity for Emilio to ask for and receive clarification of a Spanish abbreviation (5ta for quinta) that he does not understand.

In Lines CC-EE, Emilio offers a solution to Draliana’s problem. Not only does he accomplish this rather fluidly, with a maximum of five seconds between each utterance, but he also contributes valuable information to the conversation. Thus, rather than merely making bids for interaction or using brief and formulaic utterances to establish rapport or respond to requests, he is now a primary participant in exchanges, and in spite of his status as a novice Spanish user, he asserts his position as an expert gamer and a knowledgeable resource in the guild.

5 Discussion and implications

Data and analysis from this study reveal a number of affordances that are consistent with those identified in prior research on games and language learning (see Peterson, 2010 for an overview). From the moment a game starts, players are immersed in a target language context where they have multiple options for engaging in authentic communication via speaking, reading, writing, and listening with a range of interlocutors, often in ways that allow risk-taking and reflection in the target language. However, our study suggests additional affordances for language development and socialization that have not been extensively discussed previously. In this section, we will return to each of the new affordances framing this research and discuss the implications of such affordances for language teaching and learning in relation to the differing experiences of study participants.

While our study suggests that groupings of players such as guilds and parties in WoW can provide safe learning and languaging spaces, data also suggest that this affordance is not without limitations, especially when language learners are unable to find other players with whom they are comfortable interacting and from whom they are comfortable soliciting language support. A possible implication for language teaching and learning with MMOGs may be the need for instructors to provide more formal structure for group interactions. This might include scheduling times for students to play together online in groups. It might also involve assigning players of differing language and gaming ability to specific groups to allow them to teach and learn from each other.

Our study also suggests that spaces such as WoW have an explicit focus on communicative competence, thus providing opportunity for language learners to interact with native speakers in ways that allow time for reflection on language production and a significant margin for error. While such interactions clearly facilitate socialization with native speakers, there may be some question about the utility and transferability of game-specific, communicative language use. In terms of learning, we view any opportunity for authentic and active interaction in the target language as beneficial. Moreover, among the participants and one of their professors,
there is at least the perception that such interaction is beneficial. To illustrate, upon seeing an example of Emilio’s participation in chat, his Spanish professor responded to the first author via email with the following.

You know what? That is freaking impressive! You know what else, Emilio completely formulated a question and expressed himself in Spanish in a manner that exceeded the level of most of the other students. I was impressed and now I am even further so. I think you’re on to something man!!! This is exciting. I’m going to send him an e-mail telling him he’s doing well.

While further studies are needed to determine the exact impact of MMOG participation on student learning, this study at least suggests that participation in such spaces can have a positive impact on students’ confidence and perceived competence, as well as their willingness to interact in the target language.

The final affordance introduced in this study, that of promoting goal-directed, collaborative action between experts and novices, also has implications for teaching and learning that relate to students’ sense of confidence. For Emilio, his expertise as a gamer was a means of mitigating his status as a beginning Spanish learner within the game community. Therefore, he was able take on the role of a mentor and a meaningful contributor to the groups and guilds in which he participated, while at the same time experiencing some measure of success with his interactions in Spanish. However, as a contrasting example, although Silvania’s Spanish was more advanced, as a novice to WoW, her language abilities were overshadowed by her struggles with the mechanics of the game. Moreover, it may be that her lack of familiarity with the cultural norms for communication in the game (a focus on function rather than form) prevented her from taking full advantage of this affordance. This suggests that when using spaces such as WoW for language learning, it may be beneficial to ensure that students have at least a basic proficiency with the mechanics of the game. This could be accomplished through instructor-led tutorials either via video (incorporating voice, text, screen shots, and in-game video) and/or via mandatory group instructional sessions conducted within the game and in the target language. In addition, just as some professors determine some portion of students’ in-class grade based on in-class participation, so could professors require a specific amount of in-game participation via voice and chat channels.

In spite of the affordances for MMOG learning discussed in this article, it is also important to recognize the limitations of studying language development in such a context. First and foremost, as the contrasting data from Silvania demonstrates, Emilio is a unique case in that he is an expert gamer and WoW connoisseur. It is unlikely that learners unfamiliar with the game would have the same experiences, and this should be taken into consideration when planning for instruction. In addition, MMOGs allow players a lot of freedom, which is one of the major draws to this game genre. However, for L2 learning, this freedom comes at a cost. None of the quests (and quest text) are graded in terms of language ability, so learners are presented with brutally authentic texts (see also Thorne, Fischer, & Lu, 2012 (this issue)). The interactions with other players online cannot be scripted, so language that learners are exposed to cannot be controlled, and language forms cannot be fully anticipated. WoW does offer utilities in the form of add-ons (special scripts
written by users that allow players to customize their user interface, add utility, etc.). In fact, the first author is currently working on add-ons that will give mouse-over translation functionality (when you roll the mouse over a “oveja” it will also say “sheep”), as well as dictionary functionality. Other add-ons could be created, focusing learner attention to specific language forms (see White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991) for discussion of benefits), or that guide learners in a more traditional language learning progression via a game-based curriculum.

6 Conclusion

As sociocultural contexts characterized by shared proclivities rather than language ability, MMOGs provide unique contexts for language learning and socialization that are a marked contrast to the insulated communicative environments of many language classrooms. Our study suggests that for the two students we investigated, the affordances of the game space were beneficial for participants’ language development and socialization. However, findings also suggest that these affordances might be enhanced by a more structured approach to introducing MMOGs into formal language learning environments like classrooms. Exploratory case studies such as this one can provide insight into how better to structure larger scale teaching and learning ventures using MMOGs so as to take full advantage of the affordances provided by these new contexts for computer assisted language learning.

References


