Towards Enhancing Indigenous Language Acquisition Skills through MMORPGs

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Abstract

The growing interest and access to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) has opened up significant new scope for educational methodologies, from standard language teaching options through to formalising the skills that a 'player' develops through their quests and other activities. This scope is extensive and has created numerous opportunities for innovation both within education and the world of work. This is evidenced by the increasing presence of educational establishments in the virtual world, with Second Life being the most popular for conventional educational purposes. In Second Life and many other realms participants are earning some income and in some cases enjoying a reasonable living from online activities, while developing their skills base.

These MMORPGs may open opportunities for promoting language acquisition provided this is located within a suitably attractive realm; 'players' would then engage in activities that would contribute to their abilities to use the indigenous languages in everyday life. This article explores how such a system could be developed and the likely contribution it could make to promote a multilingual environment at school and post school levels. Further, it will identify the implications for the future of teaching and learning through the harnessing of MMORPGs.

Keywords: massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs),

electronic gaming, language acquisition, multilingual environment, virtual worlds, teaching and learning, mother tongue, Second Life, World of Warcraft, Entropia.

Introduction

> Technologies are artificial, but … artificiality is natural to human beings. Technology, properly interiorized, does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it (Ong 1982:82-83).
>
> Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away (Dick 1985:3).

The growing significance of the electronic gaming industry, where the value in 2005 was already in the region of $7 billion more than the movie industry (Web Reference 1—WR1), indicated that as a sector it was likely to become the leading element of entertainment for many parts of modern society. This impact cannot be ignored, and opens a plethora of opportunities for mobilising gaming for purposes that allow the combination of entertainment and education, ideally for establishing a pedagogic paradigm that promotes the essential concept of 'learning as fun'. Given the characteristics associated with electronic games, more especially their flexibility, geographical reach and low barriers to entry, this makes them potentially ideal tools for addressing a number of teaching and learning challenges.

Synonymous terms abound for the semiotic domain that this article will explore. From video games through to virtual worlds to artificial reality, the authors have selected massively multiplayer online role-playing Games (MMORPG) to act as a catch-all for what is a wide collection of terms. A brief list of the concepts that this aims to capture would include, 'mirror world' (Gelernter 1991), 'possible worlds' (Ryan 1991), 'metaverse' (Stephenson 1993), 'digital world' (Helmreich 1998), 'artificial world' (Capin *et al.* 1999) 'virtual community' (Rheingold 2000), 'virtual

environment' (Blascovich 2002), 'persistent worlds' (Kushner 2003) or 'synthetic world' (Castronova 2005). The logic for using the MMORPG catch all is to stress the centrality of the 'player'[1] in whichever realm or world they are engaged with. Moreover, this serves to move away from terms such as *artificial or synthetic* that can cloud the nature of the debate in as far as their connotations are of *fabrication*, and may have played a role in undermining the import of the debate pertaining to these environments (Boellstroff 2008). This has contributed to many not taking MMORPGs seriously as possible solutions for teaching and learning. This needs to be seen in the light of the fact that '… it could be argued that the information age has, under our noses, become the gaming age, and thus that gaming and its associated notion of play could be master metaphors for a range of human social relations' (Boellstorff 2008:21). It now seems that '…for the first time, humanity has not one but many worlds in which to live' (Castronova 2005:70). These worlds will involve an infinite number of social structures, experiences, communicative and survival tools. However, one thing still remains at the forefront, is that despite the 'players' role as a participant, creator, aggressor or victim, '[w]e do not really understand how to live in cyberspace' (Sterling 1992:xii).

The History of MMORPGs

The history of assessing the value of MMORPGs has been in either utopic or dystopic terms (Boellstorff 2008:26), with the associative dismissal as a valuable and usable tool or simply a mechanism for escape from the real world. The main negative perspectives are that the MMORPGs 'are hopelessly contaminated by capitalism' and 'just a form of escapism from the real world' (Boellstorff 2008:26). The former is a result of the fact that many MMORPGs are owned and managed by for-profit entities, while the latter finds many supporters.

> [T]he gratifications involved in being a member of [a virtual] community aren't the same, I would suggest, as being involved in a

[1] The term player is used in this article in inverted commas as an acknowledgement that not all are there for entertainment purposes only.

> real community …. We have created the instruments of our own enslavement—psychological and otherwise (Berger 2002:110-111).

This may seem alarmist to those who have participated casually in MMORPGs, but to those familiar with the concept of Hikikomori[2], they will recognise and attest to Berger's warning. This type of realism is widespread where many

> … see computer systems as alien intruders on the terrain of unmediated experience …. Reality, they assert, is the physical world we perceive with our bodily senses [and] … the computer is … a subordinate device that can detract from the primary world (Heim 1998:37).

There is extensive debate on the horizon as hardware will become more able to integrate the senses into the MMORPGs experience, with more participants opting for a de facto life online as being more akin to their interests and life expectations. What these negative sentiments neglect to acknowledge is that all '… human experience is always culturally mediated' (Boellstorff 2008:27). Further philosophical debate is necessary in terms of the wider role of MMORPGs but for now it is imperative that MMORPGs are effectively investigated in terms of their potential for teaching and learning, and more specifically promotion of second language acquisition. 'Whether our digital fire (as in the Promethean sense[3]) is turned to destructive or creative purposes is still up to us' (Poole 2000:240).

MMORPG have grown extensively in popularity since they first emerged on the internet in 1996, with the first recorded believed to have been Meridian 59 (WR1). However, the genre's manifestation was secured when Ultima Online became popular. There is common consensus that the MMORPGs evolved out of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), with the first

[2] *'Hikikomori' is a Japanese term coined by* Tamaki Saito to officially classify reclusive youths who refused to participate in socially established norms, in *The Bulletin of JSA* March 2002. <http://members.jcom.home.ne.jp/jsa-bull/82.html>.

[3] Inserted by authors.

developed by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle in 1978 which ran on a PDP-10[4] (WR3). The interest in MUDs in the early years was borne out in a 1993 study which demonstrated that in terms of online traffic, 10% was accounted for by hits on MUDs (Bartle 2004:12). Everquest, which Sony re-released in 1999, was the leading MMORPG before the introduction in 2004 of World of Warcraft (WoW), which heralded the modern age for MMORPG. For example, 'in WoW's 'first 24 hours sold over 240 000 copies and at any given time has an average of 500 000 users online' (WR1). The realms, worlds, platforms, universes (real and fantasy) are now a myriad of games, quests, adventures for almost all conceivable historical, present day and fantasy experiences, with the associated mix of free, fee, subscription based and/or software purchase with free or fee based use.

Developing Skills through MMORPGs

Notwithstanding this wide range of MMORPGs all carrying a plethora of quests, missions, opportunities, etc, there are few structures for the formalisation of the skills acquired by 'players' for application beyond the operational environments of the relevant realm/universe/world[5]. Obviously the problems of access to the Internet will continue to create challenges, but it is the contention of the authors that there is an anachronistic approach to the opportunities associated with technology and education, namely that access to the Internet and basic computer skills will be sufficient to enhance the life opportunities for learners across various contexts. MMORPG offer a viable model for 'players' to develop their critical and developmental [6] skills base and offer a viable route to the achievement of these outcomes and open other wider opportunities. This is in line with the feeling that today, '[t]he best sign that someone is qualified to run an internet start-up may not be an MBA, but level 70 guild leader status' (Chatfield 2008: 24).

[4] A mainframe developed by Digital Equipment Corporation it formed the basis of ARPANET (now the Internet) (WR3)

[5] The terms realm or universe will be used as a generic term of MMORPGs

[6] Here the terms critical and developmental are used in the same context as per the revised national curriculum statements http://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/Curriculum.asp.

One of the problems associated with embracing the potential of MMORPGs for educational purposes is the 'cultural premise that work and play are an inherent dichotomy' (Yee 2006a:68). This tension has to be viewed within an environment where there are no formal models that have been developed to bridge the skills developed in realms with those that formal national curriculum's require[7]. However, 'a growing number of academics and practitioners are realising that such environments also have strong potential as the Virtual Learning Environments of the future' (WR2). Capturing this potential is the challenge facing researchers and others who are interested in the wider potential for technology to the teaching and learning context.

The importance of MMORPGs is best stated by Forbes Magazine (WR4) when it identifies ten characters, careers or professions in the virtual world which show potential for earning income. Each requires differing levels, abilities and skills but they represent opportunities which are not limited necessarily by demographics and real life mobility. The only significant barrier to enter, especially in the case of free games, is access to suitable hardware and bandwidth[8]. These barriers should not be taken lightly as they continue to be the most significant problem for the harnessing of the innate potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for developing countries. However, the access issue is high on the agenda of most governments and these are likely to be addressed as these present less of a problem than the problem of endemic poverty and lack of economic opportunity.

Language Acquisition and Immersion

The last 30 years has seen considerable research on digital games across a wide swathe of academic areas (Bragge & Storgards 2007). Bragge and Storgard's study indicates that social science, law and economics account for the bulk of the relevant records found. This is indicative that the value to the

[7] This situation will not persist for too much longer as more and more focus is being given to MMORPGs.

[8] The bandwidth issue presents the biggest contemporary challenge for many countries and is often cited as a potential problem by stakeholders.

humanities of MMORPGs has been recognised but what the research also indicated is that in terms of mainstream research no attention has been given to the role that these tools can play in language acquisition.

The table below shows a listing of the most used title words and phrases of Social Sciences in the two latest time periods for research undertaken on digital gaming (Bragge & Storgards 2007).

1997-2001 [196 number of articles)]	**2002-2006 [347 number of articles]**
Video games [25]	Effects / impact / influence [34]
Effects / impact / influence [22]	Video games [26]
Computer games [19]	Computer games [22]
Children [13]	Violent video / computer games [19]
Aggression [9]	Video / Computer game playing [17]
Adolescents [7]	Aggression [12]
Gender [6]	Children [11]
Violent video / computer games [6]	Online / Internet games [11]
Relationship [5]	Adolescents [8]
Video [5]	Relationship [8]
Video / Computer game playing [5]	Violence [7]
Youth [5]	Aggressive behavior [6]
Aggressive behavior [4]	Learning [6]
Young children [4]	

The lack of language acquisition and development as a listing is indicative of the fact that no focus has yet been brought to this aspect within the MMORPGs field.

In order to establish the viability of MMORPGs for promotion of language skills it is imperative to explore how people acquire languages and to identify synergies. A detailed analysis of language acquisition is well beyond the scope of an article of this nature. However, it is important to address one critical area in terms of language and innateness, as it is here that the heredity versus environment debate is manifest. All learners will bring their unique heredity profile to a process that endeavours to enhance their acquisition of another language, and no amount of gaming will alter this

profile, consequently the only area that MMORPGs can address is associated with environment. In other words, the physiological aspects of the learner's cognitive abilities are cast in stone, making the environmental the only area that can be altered to promote language acquisition.

When addressing language acquisition it is important to distinguish between one acquired as part of a natural birthright and one acquired later in life due to other motivations. 'Language is a marker akin to dress …. [s]uccessful mastery of language implies learning it from birth' (Nash 1989:13). Nash points out that the experience of language acquisition is different for adults.

Second language acquisition can be defined as:

> L2 acquisition … the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside the classroom and 'Second Language Acquisition (SLA)' as the study of this (Ellis 1997:3).

Therefore in this case the discussion is firmly located within SLA and the application of MMORPGs to L2 acquisition. Ellis identifies two goals for SLA, one being the 'description of L2 acquisition …. Another is explanation; identifying the external and internal factors that account for why learners acquire an L2 in the way they do' (Ellis 1997:4). The external factors represents the social context and environment where the learning takes place, and can be influenced by a number of factors i.e. attitude of native speakers, learning support materials. On the other hand internal factors are driven by the learner's motivations and innate language skills, *inter alia*.

Ellis offers a further delineation in terms of the external identifying the 'catch all' mentioned at the beginning of this article as the input which the learner receives, '… that is, the samples of language to which a learner is exposed' (Ellis 1997:5). This question is central to developing any suitable models for application with MMORPGs. The essential question would be, '… do learners benefit more from input that has been simplified for them or from authentic language of native-speakers' communication?' (Ellis 1997:5). Despite the complex nature of language acquisition, it is imperative to develop an approach which can be applied in an attempt to enhance 'players' abilities to develop usable language skills.

MMORPGs and Second/ Foreign Language Acquisition

One of the possible approaches is to harness the language immersion methodology. The logic here would be that MMORPGs are immersive by nature. According to Genesee (1987:1) 'at least 50 percent of instruction during a given academic year must be provided through the second language for the program to be regarded as immersion'. Research has shown that there are many more multilingual than monolingual people in the world (Dutcher & Tucker 1994), (World Bank 1995), which indicates that there is a very fertile platform for developing further language competencies. In South Africa, the situation is much the same with many of its people able to speak more than one language.

Bostwick (WR4) identifies four reasons why immersion is an effective model for L2 acquisition:

1. Language is acquired more effectively when learned in a meaningful social context.

2. Important and interesting content provides a motivating context for learning the communicative functions of a new language.

3. L1 acquisition, cognition and social awareness go hand in hand in young children. By integrating language and content, foreign (read L2[9]) language learning, too, becomes an integral part of a child's social and cognitive development.

4. Formal and functional characteristics of language change from one context to another.

While these characteristics pertain specifically to an elementary school environment they do offer suitable pointers for developing an immersive model using MMORPGs, with the need for the experience to be meaningful and have a relevant content focus being of paramount importance. The process will be further served by assessing the goals of an immersion program. Bostwick (Bostwick WR5) lists these as follows:

[9] Authors' addition.

1. To achieve competency in the foreign language
2. To acquire the same L1 language arts skills as students in regular schools
3. To master content area skills and concepts
4. To gain a greater understanding and appreciation of other cultures

Combining these characteristics allows for the identification of possible criteria for an effective MMORPG model for L2 acquisition, namely that the MMORPG model must exhibit a situation where:

1. The context must be meaningful to the 'player'/learner
2. The content must be interesting and useful and initiate a motivation for acquiring communicative competence in the target language

These two criteria are necessary but insufficient to harness the innate potential of MMORPGs for acting as a tool for promoting L2 acquisition.

In order to effectively engage this potential of MMORPGs the concept of *cyber sociability* needs to be investigated to ensure that the dynamic nature of any realm or world can be mobilized effectively. If this is neglected then the customary asynchronous association with many language learning environments will be repeated with the associated drop off in interest. The central aspects of online sociability are 'immersion' and 'presence'. The former is important when exploring language acquisition, as discussed above. In terms of 'presence', the ideas of AFK (away from keyboard) and Lag (delay) are not significant in terms of developing a model, but these should be noted as they will have implications within the model. Here 'presence' is used to distinguish between an avatar being operated by an actual person sitting at the keyboard, as opposed to non-human system operating an avatar. In the case of MMORPGs the concept of 'immersion' '… referred to a sense that sensory experience of a virtual world is sufficiently heightened, so that persons felt they were no longer in the actual world' (Boellstorff 2008:112). In effect the 'player' is in an 'immersive virtual environment'.

This immersive characteristic of MMORPGs indicates that the scope for developing L2 skills is extensive. However, researchers and practitioners will have to explore the leveraging of the motivational aspects of the 'players' desire to participate in a realm or world with the added 'obstacles' associated with an L2 communicative environment that will be alien. Added to this would be the nature of the quest, task or journey within the realm/universe/world.

Language Acquisition and Motivation

Accepting the two characteristics identified above as the key drivers for harnessing MMORPGs**,** context and content, what are the contemporary contextual and content features of the leading MMORPGs?

> Selling virtual weaponry and real estate for a living, coordinating fifty people in a dragon-slaying expedition over a period of 5 hours, marrying someone you'll never meet and switching gender for several hours at a time (Yee 2006c:3).

This offers the uninitiated a small taste of the scope and latitudes associated with MMORPGs. These indicate that the scope in terms of contexts are almost limitless within existing platforms, and with little imagination it is clear that it is totally feasible to develop MMORPGs that can combine all the aspects of good and effective language learning pedagogies into a suitable MMORPG context or environment.

Few if any MMORPGs allow for significant altering of the realm or world within which they operate, so in a broad sense the context is 'fixed'. However, there is latitude for altering and manipulating the context (micro) in which the 'players' find themselves during their immersive experience. For example, a facilitating avatar could set tasks that are rewarded according to the use of L2 or require that all communication between a team only use L2 to communicate[10]. It will be at this level that L2 acquisition structures will need to be developed. However, no matter how effective these structures

[10] These interventions and activities will have different resource requirements and training for facilitators.

they will need to be fully complemented by a content paradigm that offers motivation and maintains interest.

Developing an understanding of the motivations for engaging with MMORPGs offers a suitable foundation for selecting and identifying which realms may offer ideal vehicles for establishing effective L2 acquisition paradigms. Yee (2005) identified that the average 'player' was 26 years old and spends 22 hours a week in their selected MMORPGs, whilst their motivations for spending this time differed. As can be seen from Yee (2005:1):

> *The fact that I was able to immerse myself in the game and relate to other people or just listen in to the 'chatter' was appealing.* [Female, 34]
>
> *I like the whole progression, advancement thing ... gradually getting better and better as a player, being able to handle situations that previously I wouldn't have been able to.* [Male, 48]
>
> *No one complains about jobs or other meaningless things. It's a great stress reducer. I like that I can be someone else for a couple hours.* [Male, 28]
>
> *Currently, I am trying to establish a working corporation within the economic boundaries of the virtual world. Primarily, to learn more about how real world social theories play out in a virtual economy.* [Male, 30]

Bartle (1996), referring to the MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon, Domain or Dimension[11], states that '… it should be noted that MUDs can be of considerable value in non-game (i.e. serious) applications'. Bartle continues to create a taxonomy for people who engage with MUDs/MMORPGs (WR6):

[11] MUDs was the preceding nomenclature for what today are knows as MMORPGs.

- Achievement within game context—where 'players' set goals for themselves, i.e. completing a quest, searching and securing treasure, beating a horde of monsters, etc.

- Exploration of the game—'players' seeking to discover the realm, initially it involves 'mapping its topology, later to experiment with its physics' (4).

- Socialising with others—most MMORPGS carry significant opportunities for socialisation and require continually more sophisticated abilities in communication.

- Imposition upon others—many of the realms require 'players' to engage in various forms of combat.

This taxonomy offers an ideal platform for a more detailed analysis of suitable pedagogic paradigms and structures that will enhance and promote L2 acquisition.

The challenge is how to capture these motivations and develop structures that will promote the acquisition of L2 and make any competencies developed transferable to real world contexts and the 'players' day to day life. That the other skills being developed in MMORPGs are transferable is unquestionable. In the Prospect interview with a 'player' called Mogwai[12], he states:

> … in WoW I've developed confidence; a lack of fear about entering difficult situations; I've enhanced my presentation skills and debating. Then there are the more subtle things; judging people's intentions from conversations, learning to tell people what they want to hear.

Mogwai continues and acknowledges that '… I am certainly more manipulative, more Machiavellian. I love being in charge of a group of

[12] Mogwai is a guild leader in WoW and wields the Twin Blades of Azzinoth, He was recently offered $8000 for his account.

people, leading them to succeed in a task' (Chatfield 2008:1).

Motives for playing in any realm will be various and range from Mogwai's need for Machiavellian expression through pleasure and entertainment to the desire to find alternative sources of income. Whatever the motives, the innate potential for engagement in realms serving a number of educational and economic outcomes is reasonably clear. The challenge facing language researchers and policy makers is how to create an environment where acquiring a language other than one's mother tongue comes with immediate inworld rewards, and how these skills can have an impact on the 'players' ability to communicate in other languages.

Recognising that there are a number of possible permutations in terms of resources and, consequently, that pedagogic challenges are hardly generic or that any suitable platform for building a viable model will require context transferability characteristics, any model should be predicated on a general set of the principles of learning. Petty (2006) offers a simple and, potentially, suitable list:

- Learners must see the value to them of the learning;
- Learners must believe they can do it;
- Learners need challenging goals;
- Learners need feedback and dialogue on their progress;
- Learning needs structuring to give it meaning to learners;
- Learning needs time and opportunities for repetition;
- Learning is about study and thinking skills as well as content.

These characteristics resonate with the experience of any person endeavouring to acquire a second language. Application of these to MMORPGs will promote a suitable experience by 'players' that will enhance language acquisition skills.

Therefore, the challenge facing practitioners is to combine the motivation aspects with effective learning principles. This requires a coherent balancing between the 'fun' element which has a crucial role to play in the 'players' motivation and the effectiveness of the language abilities that are developed. It is clear that there exists scope for developing L2 acquisition structures within existing MMORPGs or developing MMORPGs with a strict focus on L2 skills development, with the obvious

implications for resource requirements and costs. There is extensive research outstanding on this issue and the authors hope that this paper will initiate others to explore how these could be developed.

Developing Indigenous African Language Acquisition using MMORPGs

Language policy in South Africa has been a very contentious political issue and continues to act as a significant divisive area. Despite extensive policy frameworks, the progress continues to be limited in terms of advancing indigenous languages (Kaschula *et al.* 2007). This is due predominantly to the status associated with English as a language of opportunity and empowerment. Evidence abounds that even Mother Tongue (MT) speakers are eschewing their home languages in favour of English due to this, so it does not require much analysis to infer that second language speakers of indigenous languages are thin on the ground, such motivations being limited to professional and vocational requirements. 'Changing negative attitudes to the Bantu languages in South Africa is a very complex and challenging matter …. [T]he primary requirement is that these languages attain value, in particular economic, intellectual and social value' (Lafon & Webb 2008:16).

The marginalised nature of most of the indigenous languages in South Africa, added to the nature of the challenge associated with the harnessing of MMORPGs for 'players' who are not able to speak an indigenous language , both in terms of the inworld structures and the applicability in the real world creates significant hurdles that need to be traversed.

Many would argue that enhancing language abilities in an indigenous African language offers very little in terms of improved economic opportunities and is simply a tool for accessing other cultures. This being by no means unimportant, it is perceived as of less value for the potential learner. This adds extensively to the task of creating inworld incentives that are sufficiently rewarding to motivate 'players' to engage in any exercises, quests or adventures that have a coherent and intensive language element. In some quarters there is growing support for making an indigenous language compulsory to Grade 12 (Lafon & Webb 2008:52). This would create a fecund environment for mobilising MMORPGs as it would contribute

extensively to motivation, including the scope for working in pairs with one MT speaker of the relevant indigenous language in question.

Towards a Model

Many will argue that the gaming element associated with realms and universes represent this as a strictly leisure based pastime. It would be disingenuous to attempt to dismiss this argument, due to the fact that most gaming activity is undertaken in an informal setting with little consideration for capturing the skills that are developed as a 'player' enhances their status within the game/realm/universe or more generally, inworld . However, against this view is the concept of 'Serious Games' which is a term associated with the use of computer and videogames for purposes other than simple entertainment. That skills can, and are, developed by 'players' is clear. From developing the basic ability to interface with ICT through to high level negotiations and strategy skills, a 'player' may run an ambit of situations that required deft abilities. Language abilities presently are not central to a 'player's' development in MMORPGs but the need to embrace a new semiotic domain is imperative. Consequently, with some innovative input and development it is highly feasible that an environment can be established that will promote the development of language skills. For example, creating a domain where all rewards and strength points are proportional to the player's ability to engage in languages other than their mother tongue.

Developing a suitable model requires that the theoretical issues associated with language acquisition are developed and applied, in a very rigorous manner. However, this article endeavours to create a basic framework that could be applied in MMORPGs where there is a degree of freedom for user content creation. Given the scope and eclectic nature of MMORPGs, developing trajectories for a suitable L2 model abound. However, the nature of the MMORPGs is of less importance than the inworld structures that are created to establish and leverage motivation on the part of 'players' to embrace the L2. For the purpose of this article, Second Life and Entropia Universe will be the reference MMORPGs. These have been selected due to their complementary natures, with Second Life being a rendition of the 'real' world, with none of the customary fantasy elements,

fighting monsters and combat, and Entropia Universe incorporating many of those customary characteristics associated with fantasy role playing. It can be argued that both have a degree of flexibility.

According to Mindark[13], the creators of Entropia Universe (EU), it [The universe] takes the MMORPG genre to the next level by offering a unique mixture of online entertainment, social networking and e-commerce through a ground-breaking new concept: the connection of a real economy to a gigantic three dimensional virtual universe (WR7). Presently, little academic material exists that addresses EU specifically, which is testament to its status as simply a fantasy game along with a myriad of others. However, perhaps its most unique feature is that it was the first MMORPG to have a real world economy linked to the player's 'avatar'[14], i.e. where it is possible to get a cash card that can be used at 'real' world cash machines to withdraw any PED (the currency) in the EU.

Second Life (SL) has received extensive attention from businesses through academia to fringe political groups, (Boellstorff 2008; Dibbell 2006; Terdiman 2008). The key characteristic of Second Life is that it is predominately a virtual reflection of the 'real' world, with the exception that 'players' can take on fantasy avatars and move around conventionally or fly. The major advantage of SL is that it allows 'players' to create objects and content, to link to presentations, upload material, etc. Thus it carries considerably more flexibility but due to its 'real world' nature lacks elements that could be harnessed for motivation purposes.

EU has hunting and combat, two pull characteristics in terms of motivation for 'players' but Mindark do allow for the creation of a whole new universe using their software. This could offer an opportunity to develop a universe that only supports the use of an African language. With more hunting options and greater rewards there is a strong likelihood that it could develop into a serious draw factor. These will result in cost implications, but as a tool for promoting an indigenous language may prove invaluable.

SL, while having less scope for motivational factors, can be more easily harnessed in terms of inworld flexibility. For example, an African

[13] http://www.mindark.com/company/

[14] An avatar is usually the inworld representations of the person behind the character.

language medium institution can be developed for very little financial outlay. However, the standard challenges associated with real world language development will exist. Unlike EU where, as skills are developed rewards could include more advanced weaponry or ammunition for hunting, or some new mining or manufacturing technology, in SL motivation will be limited to the Linden Dollar, the currency in SL. The latter would amount to little more than 'paying' people to learn a language.

Consequently, these factors point to a quest type structure where 'players' have to gather information, objects and other material in order to advance to the next levels. All quests would be set in an African language. There can be little doubt that if MMORPGs are to become part of the language development mosaic, the need to combine inworld quests and challenges with suitable real world support must be explored and developed.

Conclusion

Given the contemporary language situation in South Africa, it is imperative that all official languages need to be celebrated if only to promote the cultural identity of the people who use them as a home language. If language policy is to become language reality it is incumbent on those who are entrusted to promote language usage to establish an environment that enhances the innate value of languages other than English and Afrikaans. It is the contention of the authors that MMORPGs offer a suitable, albeit virtual environment for creating factors that will act as motivators for achieving this goal. Through an effective mix of in-game and other incentives, indigenous language classes in schools could enjoy a significant enrichment element to their teaching and learning paradigms by using 'gaming'. The opportunities to allow MT speakers to work with non-MT speakers in a realm that aims to equalise the playing field while using their relative skills base, the former in the language being used and the latter possibly having better ICT skills and/or experience of gaming, could have a major impact on learning in the classroom and in cross cultural communication.

Through structures of this nature the creation of an environment that will make acquiring another language less onerous could become an attractive reality. This will promote cross cultural communicative abilities which will make a major contribution to the cohesive nature that South

Africans aspire too. The history of language polices pre-1994 was one of separateness and alienation. It is critical that more communities are given incentives to acquire languages other than their MT for reasons other than simply to get ahead but rather as a tool for developing a better understanding of their fellow South Africans.

The costs associated with developing solutions and relevant quests may seem high at the outset. This may be the case in terms of developer time, materials development, teacher training and other resource requirements. However, the benefits associated with enhanced language skills across other sectors of South African society will make a significant contribution to the cohesiveness of society and help deepen the democratic structures.

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