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New Media Literacies, Online Gaming, and Language Education

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New Media Literacies, Online Gaming, and Language Education^{*12}

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This paper describes second and foreign language uses of Internet communication tools, web environments, and online gaming, and critically reviews existing research and emerging technologies representing diverse pedagogical conditions in two main areas: (1) interaction in ongoing Internet-mediated environments that include popular culture blogs and web sites, fan fiction communities, language and/or culture communities; and (2) multi-user online games, including a case study of multilingual communication within a gaming environment. We propose that a critical-and-constructive appraisal of existing and emerging digital media, and the communities made possible through them, can help to forge more responsive, and more ecologically responsible, language learning opportunities for students living in increasingly mediated social and professional worlds.

Introduction

Internet information and communication technologies have amplified conventional communicative practices in the areas of audience, impact, and speed and also have enabled the emergence of distinctive communicative and cultural practices. The argument developed in this paper is that qualitative shifts in communicative contexts, purposes, and genres associated with new media necessitate a responsive and proactive vision of educational practice, particularly in the areas of first and additional language instruction.

This paper extends earlier treatments of Internet-mediated language education that appear in Kern, Ware, & Warschauer (2004), Kern (2006) and Thorne (forthcoming), and examines affiliative activity, relationship and community building, and identity construction within computer-mediated interaction, either as a design element of formal instruction or as a function of participation in non-institutionally located online environments. In particular, we explore research, pedagogical possibilities, and in some cases informal reports, within the following contexts:

1. New media studies research examining engagements in Internet-mediated environments that are not, or are only indirectly, linked to instructed L2 contexts.
2. The potential of massively multi-user online games as sites for intercultural and polylingual communication. This latter section will include a case study which examines interaction within the popular online game – World of Warcraft (produced by Blizzard Entertainment).

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We restrict this review to computer-mediated language and literacy pedagogy and research that explicitly references the developmental potential for second and foreign language learners of social and interactional aspects of online interaction.

Communication technologies in contemporary contexts

Within affluent regions of the world and for Internet users everywhere, communication and social interaction are markedly different today from even a decade ago. Massive sociological analyses have documented that the Internet has qualitatively transformed, with variable consequences, everyday communication and information practices in commercial, financial, professional, educational, recreational, and interpersonal realms (e.g., Castells, 1996; 2004). These late modern conditions raise questions as to how researchers and language educators can orient themselves to the changing qualities, purposes, and contexts of mediated language use generally and toward the issue of which genres and communication tools should be included in instructed L2 curricula.

Emerging Internet environments and new media literacies

The majority of educational research focused on second language acquisition examines development and learning within the tightly bounded confines of classrooms. Yet demonstrably, life and learning are not composed of isolated or strictly isolatable moments and spaces (e.g., Leander & Lovvorn, 2006; Roth *et al.*, 2005; Thorne, 2003). The use of the Internet, both in and out of school, is expanding rapidly, and often involves participation in communicative genres that differ from analogue-normative epistolary conventions (e.g., Crystal, 2001; Herring, 1996; Thorne & Payne, 2005; Werry, 1996). Although access to communication and information technology remains unequally distributed across geopolitical regions and social classes (see Castells, 2004; van Dijk, 2005; Warschauer, 2003), Internet user populations continue to expand around the world, significantly increasing the quantity and types of media (text, image, sound, and voice) and forms of participation available (Jenkins, 2006).

Emerging literacy practices in online environments

A great deal of research informed by the New Literacy Studies tradition (NLS) (e.g., Bazerman, 1989; Gee, 1992, 1996; Street, 1995) has clear implications for current understandings of literacy and language learning as socially and culturally situated, shaped by context, and mediated by various tools and technologies. The NLS notion of *multiple literacies*, whereby learners develop literacy skills "through multiple experiences, in multiple contexts, with multiple text genres (both oral and written), for multiple purposes" (Kern, 1995, p. 67) is especially relevant to explorations of language practices taking place in out-of-school, online settings. Moreover, the construct of *multiliteracies* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996) has been particularly helpful for exploring communicative contexts where networked information and communication technologies enable globally distributed individuals to connect using multiple languages and forms of semiotic

mediation. Many of these new literacy practices, such as text messaging, email, chat, and communication via avatar, to name just a few, extend beyond traditional print-based text.

Much of the scholarship in this area has focused on native speakers using English and other forms of semiotic representation to engage in (potentially new) varieties of literate interaction in online environments. For example, Lankshear & Knobel (2003; 2006) review a range of new language and literacy practices associated with *remixing* or the "practice of taking cultural artifacts and combining and manipulating them into a new kind of creative blend" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 106). Many types of remixing have arguably become common "writing" practices for a number of youth in online fan communities (Lessig, 2005 cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). For example, fanfiction is a practice by which fans of various media such as books, movies, television, comics, and video games borrow elements of these popular cultural texts, such as characters, settings, plotlines, to name just a few, to construct their own narrative fictions. Fans often remix these various media, combining multiple genres (e.g., creating a "crossover" in which the fiction "crosses over" between a movie and a book), languages, and cultural elements such as inserting Japanese terms and Asian cultural references into Japanese animation or *anime*-based fanfiction written in English and set within a North American story context. Remix practices can also illustrate a plurality of registers, for instance alterations between formal narrative prose and online social registers (see Black, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, for examples). Lankshear & Knobel also explore other forms of digital remixing that include the production of anime music videos (AMVs) (combining video and popular music), fan-produced translations and subtitling (combining video, image, and text), and creating amateur *manga* and/or fan art (combining image and text). Other research has explored how youth use language and new technologies strategically to strengthen social bonds and articulate their identities in online *zine* and journal communities (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002), fan sites (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000), and through social networks constructed and maintained via Instant Messaging (Grinter & Palen, 2002; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Shiu & Lenhart, 2004) as they develop "digital" literacies (Alvermann, 2002) articulating with established and emergent cultures-of-use of these Internet communication tools.

Multilingual On-Line Communities

Of late, there also has been increasing attention paid to the many online literate exchanges taking place in multiple languages, particularly in communities that coalesce around popular and youth culture. For instance, Lam's (2000; 2004; 2007) work has explored how the Internet provides new, transnational contexts for immigrant youth's English identity development and language socialization. In an early study, Lam described Almon, an immigrant from Hong Kong, who had struggled with English, been tracked as a low achieving student, and expressed significant trepidation about English, the language of his new home in the United States. In high school, however, he began to explore the Internet, developed a web site devoted to the Japanese pop (J-pop) singer Ryoko, and used his knowledge of Japanese popular culture, web design skills, as well as chat and email to create a textual identity in English. This process was mediated largely in English but also included transcultural expressive features such as emoticons, web page design,

and elements from other languages (e.g., Chinese). The online medium, coupled with his developing textual identity, bolstered Almon's confidence in communicating with a supportive, transnational group of peers who shared his interests in popular culture. Moreover, these exchanges also helped him to shift "from a sense of alienation from the English language in his adopted country to a newfound sense of expressivity and solidarity when communicating in English with his Internet peers" (Lam, 2000, p. 468).

Commenting on the differences between Almon's developmental progress in English in school and in the Internet peer group, Lam and Kramsch (2003) argued that although Almon's textual identity on the Internet was a positive and empowering discursive formation, his position in the U.S. high school "is also symbolically constructed, this time as a low-pride 'low-achiever'" (p. 155). In other words, as Lam and Kramsch note, the sophisticated genre of English language use Almon demonstrated online may not meet the selection criteria necessary to pass the high school exit composition test. This case presents a number of challenges to the conventional goals and processes of language education, such as the rigidity of the gate keeping mechanisms of high stakes testing, the disconnect between the prescriptivist epistemology of schooling and language use that is appropriate in other contexts (Internet-mediated and otherwise), and what should or could be done to leverage, and perhaps formally acknowledge, a plurality of communicative practices that are currently considered stigmatized linguistic varieties. In an age marked by transcultural and hybrid genres of communication, these issues will increase in intensity and complexity and must necessarily inform the L2 educational frameworks of the future.

In a more recent study, Lam (2004) describes how Yu Qing and Tsu Ying, two adolescent Chinese emigrants to the U.S. participated in a Chinese/English chatroom and used a hybrid form of English and Romanized Chinese to represent their identities as bilinguals. According to Lam, the hybrid or mixed-code variety of English became an integral part of establishing and maintaining a collective ethnic identity for members of this community—an identity that followed "neither the social categories of English-speaking Americans nor those of Cantonese-speaking Chinese" (p. 45). Such code-switching was also used for rhetorical purposes such as expressing humor, relationships, and social roles within the community. Lam's analysis highlights how the online culture of hybrid language use allowed these teens, who felt marginalized from their native English-speaking as well as native-born Chinese-American peers in school, to develop confidence and fluency interacting with a transnational group of youth in English.

Yi's (forthcoming; 2007) work explores the multiliterate practices of generation 1.5 Korean-American youth in an online community called *Welcome to Buckeye City* (WTBC). Drawing from ethnographic and case study data, Yi describes how this community served as a "safe house" (Canagarajah, 1997) for these youth to use their L1 of Korean and L2 of English to socialize, compose, relax, and discuss problems from their daily lives. A unique activity on WTBC was *relay writing*, whereby members of the site compose a portion of an evolving story and then "relay" the text to the next author (Yi, forthcoming). Much like the Role Play writing of fanfiction authors (Black, forthcoming; Thomas, 2005), this collaborative form of writing "moves beyond the common emphasis on research into individual composing in cyberspace and puts a new face on voluntary literacy practices, one that involves students co-constructing knowledge and understanding in a community setting" (Yi, forthcoming, p. 4). By writing with partners and in groups, these youth

are able to engage in purposeful, composition-related interactions, develop metacognitive strategies for monitoring their language use, and gain insight into the social nature of writing (Black, forthcoming).

Yi's case study analysis of Joan, a generation 1.5 Korean-American high school student in the U.S., reveals how Joan was able to use a wide range of multiliterate composing practices to develop a "writerly" identity in the WTBC community (2007, personal communication). Joan's prolific writing of poems, short stories, cards, notes, relay novels, emails, and instant messages provided her with the opportunity to take on subtly different identity roles according to the social and composing settings. By publicly posting her poetry on WTBC, Joan was also able to receive feedback from other members of the site. This feedback served the multiple purposes of helping Joan to improve her composing skills, enabling her to discuss her "adolescent thoughts and feelings" with other immigrant youth, and affirming her identity as an accomplished poet. Additionally, Joan's frequent instant messaging, chatting, and emailing helped her to develop confidence and fluency in "conversational" English and biliterate writing (Yi, 2007).

Black's (2005; 2006; 2007) empirical investigation of an online fanfiction site also centers on the multilingual composing practices of English language learner (ELL) youth. Drawing from a three-year ethnographic project, Black presents case studies of ELL youth of Asian heritage participating in a Japanese animation (anime) fanfiction writing community. In this work, Black highlights how the cosmopolitan nature of anime-based fanfiction enabled some ELL focal participants to act as cultural and linguistic "consultants" within the community by helping other fanfiction writers accurately incorporate elements of Asian cultures and languages into their story texts (Black, 2005). Akin to Lam's 2004 study, Black also found that many ELL youth used Romanized Chinese to compose hybrid or multilingual fanfiction texts that incorporated their L1 of Mandarin, L2 of English, and at times additional languages such as Japanese and French. These hybrid texts provided a means for case study participants to index their identities as multilingual and multicultural youth (Black, 2006) and participate via valued language practices that emerged within this specific fandom-inspired speech community.

An additional focus of Black's work is the many ways that online fanfiction-related activity is aligned with school-sanctioned literacy and language development practices, such as collaborative composition, peer-review, peer-editing, and mentoring (Black, 2007). For instance, Black describes how the ease of online publication made it possible for Nanako, a 16 year-old Mandarin-Chinese high school student who immigrated to Canada at age 11, to revise and repost her fanfiction texts in accordance with audience feedback on textual elements such as plot, characterization, and grammar (Black, 2007). Like many fanfiction authors, Nanako also utilized community resources such as online writing guides, composition forums, as well as generic examples from other fanfiction authors to familiarize herself with the associated techniques and conventions of different genres of writing (Black, 2005). In these ways, Nanako was able not only to improve her English writing skills but also was able to take on the identity of a popular and accomplished fanfiction author with a broad following of readers. Thus, a common thread across Black, Lam, and Yi's work is how online communities provide ELL youth with new forums for taking on powerful authorial and social roles, even as they learn and develop fluency with multiple textual forms, languages, and online registers.

Virtual environments and gaming

In this section we discuss different varieties of interaction within 3-dimensional computer-rendered environments. One exciting development due to its wide availability and relatively low cost is L2 relevant uses of off-the-shelf machine local gaming. A best selling example is *The Sims 2*, a game available in multiple languages that simulates the routine, and even the mundane, activities of everyday life. In an informal assessment of *The Sims 2* as a foreign language learning tool, Purushotma (2005) found that the vocabulary and tasks comprising the game were highly aligned with the content of conventional foreign language course content. Purushotma argues that the difference between instructed foreign language learning and a game like *The Sims 2* is that exposure to the target language is always linked to carrying out tasks and social actions, which concomitantly embeds vocabulary and grammatical constructions in rich associative contexts. For example, *The Sims 2* premise is to use tools within the game to create virtual houses, neighborhoods, communities, and the individuals and families who live there. Additionally, the families and social communities one creates within *The Sims 2* evolve over time and require food, water, sanitation, leisure activities, and the like. The computer-generated prompts (as mentioned, customizable in a wide number of languages) and messages provide situationally embedded opportunities to learn high frequency everyday vocabulary that cover many domestic and social contexts.

Other gaming environments leverage the Internet to allow multiple users to play together at the same time. This variety of multi-user online gaming is closely related to virtual environments such as *Second Life*, a 3-dimensional visually rendered world within which structured and unstructured social, professional, and work activity occur. However, there are a number of differences between the two. To take *Second Life* (www.secondlife.com) as an example of a virtual environment, the computer-enabled environment itself does not provide a comprehensive ontology, rather this is produced by the human players themselves in the form of the objects they create and the interactions and talk they produce together. Within gaming environments, by contrast, non-human player characters (NPCs) play critical roles such as giving help and assistance, providing instructions for goal-directed tasks (called quests or missions), acting as antagonists in battle, and providing functional services such as, within the game *World of Warcraft* for example, banking, skills and profession training, transportation, selling goods and materials, armor repair, and the like. In essence, in both gaming and virtual environment settings, player-to-player communication and interaction is foundational, but gaming involves much more highly structured and goal-directed activity. Increasingly, multi-player online games and virtual environments are coming to the attention of education researchers and practitioners (for a review, see Squire, 2003; see also Steinkeuhler, 2004). They have been argued to provide opportunities for immersion in linguistic, cultural, and task-based settings (Gee, 2003). An array of literacy practices have recently emerged that are associated with Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs), video games played online in a persistent virtual world in which individuals interact with other players, not only through voice and in-game chat screens, but also via digital characters called *avatars*. Such research has focused on the function and

social norms governing the use of “4337 speak” or “leetspeak” meaning “elite speak,” a specialized form of in-game writing utilizing alphanumeric characters that is used by experienced players (Black & Steinkuehler, forthcoming; Steinkuehler, 2006). Additionally, research has detailed how language and other in-game symbols are used to develop strong “projective” identities, defined as a long-term and usually consistent identity performances players project onto their in-game characters (Gee, 2004). Cultures promoting explicit assistance are also common in MMOs and instances describing how experienced players scaffold *newbies* or novices into successful participation are emerging (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Nardi, Ly, & Harris, 2007; Squire & Steinkuehler, forthcoming).

The most popular MMO at the time of this writing (August, 2007) is World of Warcraft (or WoW, produced by Blizzard Entertainment), which currently has a customer base of over 8.5 million worldwide. WoW is a graphically elaborate and visually elegant online realm that supports voice and text propositions from game-generated characters. Human gamers can act on the environment and with other human and game-generated characters, and can communicate with one another using an in-game multi-channel synchronous chat tool as well as with an asynchronous mail application (see Nardi, Ly, & Harris, 2007). To better acquaint L2 educators with the sorts of interactions that can occur in massively multi-user gaming environments, we provide below an in-depth example of online conversation from a multi-lingual gaming community and discuss its implications for L2 learning.

Case study of multi-lingual intercultural communication within World of Warcraft

What opportunities exist in MMOGs like WoW for language use and language learning? In an exploratory effort to assess this question, Thorne (forthcoming) describes a multi-lingual intercultural dialogue between two gamers, one American (Meme) and the other Ukrainian (Zomn). The analysis presented here is limited to one in-game conversation between two gamers, but it is suggestive of intercultural communication that is reported to occur frequently on WoW and other transnational gaming sites (Thorne, 2006b). Meme, the North American gamer, set the context of the interaction as follows:

This started in this one valley off to the side of a zone I was in. I was hunting baby dragons for exp [experience points] when another higher-level character came along and started killing them too. I sent them a message asking why they were hunting them since they wouldn't get much exp off them anymore, and they said they wanted leather. I then worked out a deal with them that they would just skin the stuff I killed so I could get the exp and they would get the leather, and then they messaged me with this.

As Meme's contextualization of the action at hand indicates, interaction in even battle-focused role-playing games also includes collaboration and negotiated division of labor in the carrying out of complex actions. Note that acronyms are translated within brackets. Otherwise, the text of this opening sequence has been unaltered.

1. Zomn: ti russkij slychajno ?
2. Meme: ?
3. Zomn: nwm :)) sry [sorry]

4. Meme: what language was that?
 5. Zomn: russian :)
 6. Meme: was going to guess that
 7. Meme: you speak english well?
 8. Zomn: :)) where r u [are you] from ?
 9. Meme: USA, Pennslyvania
 10. Zomn: im from Ukraine ...
 11. Meme: ah nice, do you like it there?
 12. Zomn: dont ask :))) at least i can play wow :))
 13. Meme: haha it is fun indeed, I have a friend from ukraine actually
 14. Zomn: :)) so what did hes says about it ?
 15. Meme: he liked it actually, he moved here when he was about 10
 16. Meme: I went to high school with him
 17. Meme: but his mom hated it there
 18. Zomn: ic /// [I see]
 19. Meme: so how old are you? do you go to school?
 20. Zomn: im 21 .. law academy ...
 21. Meme: ah nice, want to be a lawyer then?
 22. Zomn: sry for my english but ill try to do my best :((
 23. Zomn: yeap :)))

The dialogue between Meme and Zomn begins with a case of mistaken linguistic identity, but this mistake in turn provides an opportunity for both parties to build alignments and to enact what Kramsch (1999) has described as an *intercultural stance*. In particular, Meme describes a friendship with a Ukranian. Zomn, the more advanced player by experience, affirms their shared passion for WoW. Meme and Zomn are still discussing school and interests when Meme initiates the following sequence:

24. Meme: kak dela?
 25. Zomn: :))) normalno :)))
 26. Meme: if I may ask, what did I say haha, I'm not quite sure
 27. Zomn: how r u :) ///
 28. Meme: what does normalno mean? good?
 29. Zomn: i sad goooooood :)))
 30. Meme: alright =)
 31. Meme: do you speak any languages besides russian?
 32. Zomn: yeap ... english :) ... n studing spanish ..
 33. Zomn: per aspera ad astra :) ?
 34. Meme: through our endeavours, to the stars =)
 35. Meme: nice phrase
 36. Zomn: i like it too

At the very start of this short conversation with Zomn, Meme had contacted a Ukranian high school friend using AOL Instant Messenger and had asked him how to say something appropriate in Russian. This overlapping use of multiple information and communication tools, very common among sophisticated Internet users (and particularly youth, see Thorne & Payne, 2005) is a representative example of what Jones (2004) describes as *polyfocality* – the use of multiple semiotic resources in near simultaneity. This result was posted as line (24) above. Zomn provides the appropriate adjacency pair, responds to Meme's question about knowing other languages (31), then in line (33) posts the Latin proverb, *per*

aspera ad astra, which Meme is able to translate, producing what likely was an unexpected but shared perspective that good things are won through hard work, a sensibility that fits well with the challenges each is experiencing in advancing their character development within WoW. The discussion continued for approximately 100 more turns and shifted seamlessly between two tracks – one generated areas of mutual interest (popular music such as Blink 182) and questions about life goals and pursuits, the other involved negotiating their immediate collaborative actions and more general strategies related to leveling up their characters within WoW. There were also a few overtly pedagogical exchanges suggesting potential opportunities for language learning through relationship building and mutually beneficial in-game actions. In the first, Meme has again used IM to contact his Ukrainian friend for phrases he could use. Note that certain turns have been removed.

37. Meme: Ya lublui fceu v moy popoo
 38. Meme: do you get any exp off of these if you kill them? if so lets party
 39. Zomn: lets for 3k
 40. Meme: sounds good, so what did what i said before mean?
 41. Meme: i was just asking my friend from ukraine what to say
 42. Meme: and don't know what it means
 43. Zomn: it wasnt right ... but kinnda 'kiss my ass'
 44. Meme: haha are you serious? i'm going to kill him, sorry about that
 45. Zomn: ahhh np :)))) [no problem]
 46. Zomn: u can kill him now :))))
 47. Meme: yeah, I will once I get home, he's in my hometown
 48. Meme: and I'm off at college
 49. Zomn: tell him that u got an interpriter now :)
 50. Meme: will do haha
 51. Zomn: is 'interpriter' right ? :((
 52. Meme: it's actually interpreter, but that was close

This seemingly prosaic excerpt from the larger strip of talk (totaling 140 lines) includes many of the elements conventional L2 classrooms seek to encourage, such as drawing from external resources for the production of experimental L2 production (Meme's outside assistance from his Ukrainian friend via IM), Meme's Russian language utterance (line 37) and request for a comprehension check (lines 41-42), and Zomn's evaluative judgment "it wasn't right ..." and translation in line 43. This segment is followed by a successful repair sequence initiated by Meme (lines 44-50) that overlaps with Zomn noticing a probable orthographic problem in his spelling of 'interpriter' (line 51) and Meme's overt correction and closing of the sequence with an encouraging softener, "but that was close" (line 52). This suggests that the interactive features evident in the speech exchange system (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) represented in this spate of online discourse form an impressive context for language learning. First, the conversation was naturally occurring and unconstrained by the fabricated (if also developmentally useful) communication characterizing much instructed setting discourse. The matrix language for this interaction was English but three languages (including the Latin aphorism) were used in total. The transcript illustrates reciprocal alternations in expert-novice status wherein both participants provided expert knowledge, language-specific explicit corrections, made requests for help, and collaboratively assembled successful repair sequences. From an ethnomethodological perspective (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967), the social or-

der assembled by this dyad illustrates significant opportunities for both producing new knowledge and refining existing knowledge in the areas of language use (English for Zomn and Russian for Meme) and WoW associated game strategy (not discussed in this essay, but see Thorne, 2006b). Finally, an enduring affiliative bond appears to have been established that pertained to continued intra-game activity as well as to out-of-game social networks. Evidence for this bond was displayed in the following leave-taking sequence (lines 53-62, below). The two players agree to add one another to in-game friends lists, proleptically sanctioning the possibility for future intra-game interaction. In (lines 58-59), Meme indirectly indexes his prior exposure to a few common Russian words, and presumably the relationship with his Ukrainian childhood friend, by asking Zomn to check his spelling of the Russian word for goodbye. In response, Zomn suggests a more suitable and peer-register alternative (#60).

53. Zomn: :) .. dont u mind if i add u to friend list ?
 54. Zomn: yeah :)
 55. Meme: go ahead, i'll add you too and we can group again sometime
 56. Zomn: sure :))
 57. Zomn: nice too meet u //
 58. Meme: you too, I forget how to spell goodbye in russian, dasvidania?
 59. Meme: Is that sort of close?
 60. Zomn: it is right ... or ... just 'poka'
 61. Meme: alright, thanks
 62. Meme: see ya

In an uncorroborated but interesting follow-up to this episode, during an informal conversation with the American student, he mentioned a strong interest in starting Russian language courses. He also reported that another student in his dorm, a highly enthusiastic gamer, had already begun to study Chinese with the primary goal of more fully participating in Chinese language-mediated game play. For the growing number of individuals participating in MMOG environments, the international, multilingual, and task-based qualities of these social spaces, where language use is literally social action, may one day make them *de rigueur* sites for language learning. Or somewhat ironically, but suggested by the American student's comment above, perhaps interest in foreign language study will become in-part driven by students who wish to enhance their gaming skills and affiliative capabilities in these language intensive virtual environments.

Conclusion

A unifying theme of the research on emerging Internet environments, gaming, and new media literacies is that the social accomplishment of language development is not an end in itself. Rather, the desire to build expressive capacity is driven by its use value as a resource for creating and maintaining social relationships that are meaningful in the participants' lives. In this sense, certain developmental trajectories occurring in informal learning environments may only be possible in self-selected activity marked by the establishment of relatively egalitarian, and situationally plastic, participation structures. Research on learning in non-institutionalized digital environments is in its relative infancy.

Further research is needed that documents what Brouer and Wagner (2004) describe as "collections of phenomenological similarity" that serve as resources for the construction of "intersubjective meaning in social life" (p. 31). Future work in this area should help to highlight the evolving contours of possibility for language development in the trans-cultural spaces of non-institutional online environments and associated cultures-of-use.

The Internet has enabled multiple new opportunities for information gathering, enhanced possibilities for producing and disseminating information to others, and has provoked changes in the granularity of information sharing between spatially dispersed co-workers, friends, and family members. Especially among the digital native generation (Presky, 2001), a descriptor for individuals who quite literally grew up with (and through) the use of Internet information and communication tools, it is apparent that social as well as academic communication is mediated by participation in digital environments such as social networking sites (www.facebook.com, www.myspace.com), blog networks, web sites, instant messaging, gaming, and voice and text messaging over cell phones (see Thorne and Payne, 2005, p. 381-386). This increase in mediated communication in the service of community building and maintenance suggests that for many individuals, performing competent identities in second and additional language(s) now involves Internet-mediation as or more often than face-to-face and non-digital forms of communication. It is also clear that, unlike Internet use in L2 education in earlier times, when the Internet was typically perceived as a proxy environment for the development of conventional L2 learning objectives such as face-to-face communication and non-digital writing, Internet-mediated communication is now a high-stakes environment that pervades work, education, interpersonal communication and, not least, intimate relationship building and maintenance (Castells, 1996). Education generally, and language education particularly, will need to accommodate emerging communication tools, their emergent and plastic cultures of use, as well as their attendant communicative genres that are, and have been for some years, everyday dimensions of competent social and professional activity.

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