Electrate Language Learning: An Analysis of Foreign Language Acquisition in Virtual Environments

Anna Wilkerson
Clemson University, awilker@clemson.edu

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ELECTRATE LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Professional Communication

by
Anna Beth Wilkerson
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Accepted by:
Dr. Jan Rune Holmevik, Committee Chair
Dr. Cynthia Haynes
Dr. Summer Taylor
ABSTRACT

This thesis delves into three different virtual platforms that have potential to promote foreign language learning using a constructionist, personal approach: Second Life, a three-dimensional multi-user virtual environment (MUVE); Livemocha, a social networking site; and World of Warcraft, a multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). Each platform is built on varying levels of pedagogical influence. Livemocha, for instance, is built entirely around the principle of tandem language learning whereas Second Life is not designed around such principles but has the capability of incorporating them. Lastly, World of Warcraft does not contain the ability for players to build pedagogy into the platform, but users may learn a foreign language through informal interaction with the game and other players.

Through participant observation, I provide an analysis of the three platforms in light of theories from three major fields: gaming, rhetoric, and language learning. In place of current theories of language learning, I offer a new approach grounded in Gregory Ulmer’s (2003) concept of electronic literacy, or electracy. This new theory is known as electrate language learning (ELL) and emphasizes the need for personal, adaptable language instruction that encourages foreign language acquisition while capitalizing on learners’ need for literacy in electronic platforms. Lastly, I delve into implications of this theory for teachers, learners, and researchers and offer suggestions for future areas of research.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have come to fruition without the help of numerous teachers and professors throughout my undergraduate and graduate careers. First, I would like to thank Lisa Luedeman, my undergraduate communications advisor, who first taught me about research methods and who, without realizing it, encouraged me to pursue graduate studies. I also want to thank each of my undergraduate Spanish professors who inspired me to learn a new language and to experience a new culture. Your interest in my education has led in large part to this thesis and to a richer life experience.

I also want to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Jan Rune Holmevik, without whom this thesis would not have been possible. His willingness to meet with me frequently to brainstorm ideas, as well as his constant challenge to broaden my thinking, has made this thesis better than I could have ever made it alone. Finally, I want to thank my committee members, Dr. Cynthia Haynes and Dr. Summer Taylor, whose encouragement and support have further developed this thesis. Your contributions have been invaluable in making this work what it is today.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review .......................................................... 1
- Why We Learn Languages ................................................................. 7
- Relevant Theories and Concepts .......................................................... 9
- Thesis Overview ................................................................................. 14

## Chapter 2: Methodology .............................................................................. 17
- Participatory Observation ................................................................. 19
- Field Notes ......................................................................................... 20
- Interviews ......................................................................................... 22
- Theories for Analysis ......................................................................... 24
- Gaming Theory .................................................................................. 26
  - Flow Theory ................................................................................... 26
  - Player Archetypes ......................................................................... 27
  - Ergodic Literature ......................................................................... 30
- Rhetorical Theory ............................................................................... 32
  - Three Proofs ................................................................................. 32
  - Discourse Communities ................................................................. 33
  - Rhetorical Situation ....................................................................... 34
- Language Learning ............................................................................. 35
  - Tandem Learning ........................................................................... 35

## Chapter 3: History of the MOO and Second Life ................................................. 37
- History of the MOO ........................................................................... 37
- Educational MOOs ............................................................................ 40
- Foreign Language MOOs ................................................................. 43
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is <em>Second Life</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Basics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of Foreign Language Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Language Learning through <em>Livemocha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Basics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining <em>Livemocha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Language Learning through <em>World of Warcraft</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is <em>World of Warcraft</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: A Theory of Foreign Language Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Learning that Occur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Livemocha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>World of Warcraft</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations &amp; Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanding Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Exemption Determination Letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent Form for In-Person Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent Prompts for Online Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verification of Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Grand Esotericum bar in <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Digital representation of tandem learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s flow chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Richard Bartle’s original four player archetypes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Results for a “Killer” from the Bartle Test of Gamer Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>A textual description of LinguaMOO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Login interface for <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>My avatar “rezzing” a circular prim in <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Different races of avatars in <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Creating a new default character and name in <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Editing a default avatar’s physical appearance in <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>My first avatar as a Spanish flamenco dancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Chat dialogue window in <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Dr. Luke’s <em>Second Life</em> avatar, Profesor Juran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>Weekly Spanish language activity platform in <em>Second Life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>Dr. James Abraham’s <em>Second Life</em> avatar, Calisto Encinal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>Interactive Spanish pharmacy simulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td><em>Mercado</em> in Dr. Abraham’s interactive Spanish language sim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>A virtual ordering counter in Monash University’s Chinese teahouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Suggested language partners to “grade” one’s work in <em>Livemocha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>A magnet exercise in <em>Livemocha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>An example of a flashcard from a highly ranked flashcard set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Details of how 710 Mochapoints were accrued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Three separate profile pictures from <em>Livemocha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>A user comment on a pronunciation exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>A user comment on a pronunciation exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>An example of a “killer” archetype as applied to <em>Livemocha</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5

5.1. An example of a quest log in World of Warcraft ........................................... 101
5.2. Different communication channels in World of Warcraft ............................. 107
5.3. Color-coded chat channels ............................................................................. 108
5.4. An example of guild chat .................................................................................. 110
5.5. Local chat with group members in a Latin American server ......................... 111
5.6. A blood elf waving to another player ............................................................... 113
5.7. Customizing an avatar in World of Warcraft .................................................. 117
5.8. My avatar, Tandema, with her pet ................................................................. 118
5.9. A World of Warcraft avatar celebrating “Love is in the Air” ...................... 120
5.10. World of Warcraft combat in a Player-vs.-Player (PvP) realm ..................... 122

Chapter 6

6.1. Gregory Ulmer’s shift from orality to literacy to electracy ............................... 127
6.2. Fantasy castle in Second Life ........................................................................... 132
6.3. “Connecting” via the chat feature in Livemocha .......................................... 133
6.4. Architecture in World of Warcraft’s Undercity ............................................. 136
# LIST OF TABLES

**Chapter 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1.</td>
<td>Tasks completed in each environment</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Picture for a moment a Spanish lounge, full of patrons sipping on their favorite beverage while hanging out with friends. One drinks café con leche while reclining on a black chaise while another leans against the bar, ordering a cocktail. In the back area of the lounge, a woman sings traditional flamenco music while several others look on and comment on the beauty of her voice. A rather opinionated onlooker, however, lets it be known in Spanish that he finds flamenco outdated and thinks the lounge should bring in
more modern singers. Soon, an open debate ensues in which everyone in the bar discusses the cultural relevance of flamenco.

This scene is just one of many that can take place in Second Life, a 3-D virtual world where users interact with avatars, or players’ digital representations of themselves, in a socially constructed cyber reality. It represents a shift in how we interact with other people, how we view reality, and even how we learn languages because it removes many of the physical barriers typically evident in face-to-face education. Virtual worlds such as Second Life demonstrate how digital environments are changing the face of teaching and learning today and indicate a move away from what Ian Bogost (2007) terms “behaviorism” (p. 234). That is, platforms like Second Life and other similar multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) shift from a traditionalist or positivistic view of interacting and learning through reinforcement to a more constructivist approach that “refocuses education on the practice of individual cognitive development as a goal in itself, a goal not always reconnected with subject-specific learning outcomes” (Bogost, p. 235).

Although a few studies have investigated language learning in virtual environments such as Second Life, few studies have examined how virtual environments designed specifically for such instruction differ from those that are originally designed for entertainment. Therefore, a gap exists among the literature. Research that investigates environments with varying levels of foreign language pedagogy could pave the way for future applications that literally combine the best of virtual environments by identifying which elements of each medium contribute most effectively to foreign language
instruction for particular types of students. It could also pave the way for new, more constructivist approaches that utilize advancing technology while appealing to a wide variety of learners.

In addition to moving away from functionalist approaches, virtual platforms like Second Life indicate a shift beyond a traditional view of literacy to what Gregory Ulmer (2003) terms “electracy,” or electronic literacy. According to Ulmer, throughout history society has moved from an oral tradition of learning through speaking, to a literate tradition of writing and reading, and now finally to an electrerate tradition in which learners must communicate in a variety of electronic environments, using voice, writing, images, and film, among other modes. Within the oral tradition, for someone to learn a new language, he or she would need to physically visit another country or speak face-to-face with someone who spoke the target language. During the literate tradition, he or she would attend school and learn a new language through reading and writing in the classroom setting. However, with new virtual environments such as Second Life, learners must find ways to navigate complex electronic platforms to learn a language.

In order to do this, I propose that language learners operate with a new theory in mind: electrate language learning, or ELL. This theory supposes that language learning should be personalized and adaptable while allowing learners to take advantage of emerging technologies that promote electronic literacy, or electracy. In operating alongside this theory, learners and teachers can make language learning more personal, customizing the environment for their particular needs and going against behaviorist
approaches to teaching, which operate under the so-called “drill-and-kill” method of learning.

Traditionally, behaviorist approaches stress memorization of structures and facts while “ignoring the private, mental processes inherent in individual human beings” (Bogost, 2007, p. 234). Constructionist approaches, on the other hand, redirect education to the individual, emphasizing learning through action. According to Bogost, constructivism has been criticized for lacking “scientific basis,” but he contends that it offers an avenue for producing abstract knowledge that transfers to other learning situations (p. 234). In the case of videogames in particular, a constructionist approach emphasizes general principles gained from the tasks in the game that can be applied to one’s life, rather than focusing on the content-specific skills acquired within the game (Bogost, p. 234). Even though this perspective emphasizes the importance of developing long-term critical thinking skills, it fails to acknowledge that “videogames simulate specific experiences that provide insights into the general relationships that drive those experiences” (Bogost, p. 241). In other words, the particular tasks and context of a videogame are equally important as the general principles one can take away from them.

As an intermediate to behaviorism and constructivism, Bogost (2007) therefore offers “procedural literacy,” which involves understanding “both the specific nature of a material concept and the abstract rules that underwrite that concept” (p. 257, emphasis in original). The binary of behaviorism versus constructionism relates to Patricia Bizzell’s (1986) division of foundationalist and anti-foundationalist approaches to writing. When examining the pedagogical implications of videogames—and indeed any other virtual
platforms—we must make sure we do not fall into the trap of favoring either behaviorist or constructivist approaches completely, lest we allow our new anti-foundationalist approach to slide back into a foundationalist view of learning. We must not, in other words, assume that we can ever fully escape our previous approaches to learning or presume that our new approaches are free from critique. Rather, we must strive to always become critically aware of the theoretical underpinnings that influence our views on learning and teaching within virtual environments. Doing so will help us avoid perpetuating a version of reality with which we may not necessarily agree, a notion that James Berlin (1982) hits on in his discussion of the major pedagogical theories of contemporary composition.

According to Berlin (1982), these four approaches—the neo-Aristotelian, current-traditionalist, neo-Platonic, and the new epistemic—each teach a unique version of reality. The method he prefers, and which seems to be becoming increasingly common in education today, is the new epistemic. This view stipulates that through writing we construct reality; knowledge is socially constructed, interactive, and constantly evolving. Since teachers advocate a way of being in the world, Berlin argues, they need to examine what their view of reality is so they do not make the mistake of pushing a view with which they do not necessarily agree or understand. Although Berlin seems to focus on English composition specifically, language teachers and learners can benefit from his message. In an era where students are becoming increasingly technology savvy, interacting both with each other and the digital environments that surround them daily, it behooves us to take note of the version of language learning we are teaching them and to
determine whether or not we are taking full advantage of the technology available to us. Do we want to produce students who can memorize flash cards in French but cannot order a salad in a French restaurant? Or do we want to provide avenues for engaging our students in productive ways that will allow them to extend their language learning beyond the classroom? By evaluating our current pedagogical approaches to language learning and exploring the benefits current technology has to offer, we can hopefully examine what works best for a diverse student population while capitalizing on new approaches to learning.

Although learning in virtual spaces is certainly not a new phenomenon, the study of foreign language acquisition in such environments needs further exploration, particularly under a multidisciplinary lens. Furthermore, as more and more virtual platforms emerge, it becomes necessary to examine those particular environments in depth so that we may discover their potential benefits and drawbacks. Doing so will provide options for foreign language instructors who wish to incorporate such technology in their classrooms and offer opportunities for learners acquiring language skills in an increasingly competitive, multicultural world. Furthermore, analyzing such environments under a multidisciplinary lens will provide implications for researchers, students, and teachers in a variety of fields, including but certainly not limited to, gaming, rhetoric, and language learning.
Why We Learn Languages

Before delving into current uses of technology for foreign language learning, understanding the underlying reasons people learn foreign languages in the first place is important. Generally, the rationale depends on the individual and the context in which he or she acquires the language. However, foreign language learning usually occurs with some goal in mind, whether it is for practical or humanistic reasons. For example, many learners wish to speak with foreign family members, to meet a language requirement for college, or to work in a particular business. Additionally, many learn languages out of mere curiosity and perceive language acquisition as an intellectual challenge. For these learners, language acquisition may stem from an intrinsic desire to better themselves, to more effectively interact with others so that they can further explore who they are and who they want to become.

As Martin Heidegger (1949) says, being is a suspension. In other words, being is a form of constantly propelling oneself forward in an effort to attain an ideal self. For many learners, foreign language acquisition comes from an intrinsic desire to be something better: a more proficient communicator, someone more in tune with culture, and someone with a broadened means for thinking about life and being. For others, learning a foreign language allows them to enter new discourse communities that before they did not have access to. In essence, a new language provides them with a fresh way of “being,” of acting and interacting in the world. This sentiment is echoed in an ancient Czech proverb which states, “You live a new life for every new language you speak. If you know only one language, you live only live once” (Omniglot, 2010, para. 1). In other
words, learning a language can propel one forward toward a previously undiscovered version of him or herself.

In a time when international commerce is booming, foreign language requirements are increasing, and students are interacting more and more with foreign language speakers, we need to find ways to make foreign language learning as effective as possible. Between 2002 and 2006 alone, “enrollments in language classes expanded by 12.9%” in the United States” (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2007, p. 2), with many of these enrollments going toward non-European languages. While this increase represents a trend toward emphasis on foreign language learning in the U.S., we must ask ourselves if learners are really obtaining what they need from the teaching environment and how we can cater language instruction to particular learner needs. According to Else Hayaman (1986), “A positive attitude toward other languages and cultures, an openness and flexibility in learning style, and a high level of motivation are the most important qualities a student can bring to the foreign language learning experience” (para. 9). As she mentions, a large component of foreign language learning is openness and flexibility in learning style. Foreign language learning, like all types of learning, does not occur in the same manner for all learners. Nor should it. The goal of foreign language instruction should be to determine the appropriate context and method for learning for each individual, to move toward more constructionist or anti-foundationalist views of teaching languages, rather than providing a catch-all approach for everyone. For many, virtual environments provide a unique opportunity to make foreign language learning more relevant and fruitful.
Relevant Theories and Concepts

In recent years, a surge in academic studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies has greatly improved our understanding of their potential for enhancing learning. In many cases, CMC has been shown to improve interaction among students and teachers by facilitating an online environment in which students feel free to express themselves openly, without fear of judgment. Overbaugh and Lin (2006), for instance, found that CMC can lead to lower anxiety and increased participation among students who feel uncomfortable participating in traditional, face-to-face classroom settings. In addition, such technologies have demonstrated benefits ranging from improved critical thinking abilities (Jin, 2005) to constructive knowledge gains (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 2003). Specific CMC technologies such as chat rooms, instant messaging, MOOs (multi-user, object-oriented domains), and MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) have been studied in increasing depth within the last 15 years, and their emergence in classroom environments is growing rapidly.

Through CMC technologies, it is argued, students are able to take advantage of emerging technology while also enhancing their ability to learn in a social context (Bryant, 2006; Markus, 2003). Synchronous CMC technology especially, which is “time and place dependent,” has been shown to produce “a marked increase in students’ interactivity” and a willingness to “interact and ask questions” (Newlin & Wang, 2002, p. 326). As advances in CMC educational technology have grown, educators have begun taking advantage of new media such as virtual worlds to encourage language learning. Through such study, researchers have identified several benefits of virtual learning,
including the capability of building language skills through reflection on exploratory action as well as interaction with other users. Lienhard Legenhausen and Markus Kötter (2000), for instance, discovered that MOOs allow students to improve linguistic abilities because they “can ask each other about the meaning of an unknown word or phrase, request clarification, or open up a dictionary in a separate web browser while
communicating” (p. 2). Similarly, Todd Bryant found that MMORPGs “create a simulated environment of language immersion where students are given the opportunity to apply their language skills toward ‘real life’ goals within an extensive context” (p. 1).

The process Legenhausen and Köttler (2000) describe is known as tandem learning and has been studied in MOOs, MMORPGs, chatrooms, email exchanges, and various computer networking programs. It is a process whereby students are paired with learners who speak their target language so that all parties involved can improve their language skills at a similar pace. For instance, a French speaker wanting to learn Chinese might be paired with a native Chinese speaker who wants to learn French. Through direct interaction with one another, each can teach the other more of the desired language. This interaction relies on the principles of autonomy, reciprocity, and bilingualism. Autonomy refers to each person’s willingness to advance his or her own learning, reciprocity entails a willingness to help one’s language partner, and bilingualism represents the ultimate goal of the exchange (Chung et al., 2005).

Although a wealth of research has been conducted on CMC in educational settings, most of it has focused specifically on language learning in students’ first language (Bryant, 2006; Campbell, 2003) or it has not fully taken advantage of technologies that lend themselves to tandem learning. A possible explanation for this is that many foreign language educators fear losing control of the classroom by placing their students in a potentially chaotic virtual environment in which they learn language skills that are less than ideal. Because of such fears, language learning in virtual environments is an underexploited but potentially very powerful tool in foreign language
pedagogy. Despite such fears, in recent years foreign language learning has begun to emerge in virtual platforms—both those geared specifically toward foreign language acquisition and those that simply encourage foreign language acquisition as a byproduct of interaction with the environment and other users.

For instance, certain platforms are based entirely on well-known pedagogical theories of foreign language acquisition while others are not built on such principles but provide opportunities for the user to implement learning pedagogy him or herself. Additionally many virtual platforms are not based on pedagogical principles of foreign language instruction, nor necessarily provide opportunities to “build” the pedagogy. Nevertheless, these environments in many instances lend themselves to foreign language acquisition as a side effect of interaction with other users and with the environment itself. They, therefore, offer opportunities for users to engage in meaningful foreign language exchanges as a means to participate with other users in the environment.

*Livemocha*, for instance, is a social networking website built primarily on the principle of tandem learning, or the process whereby a learner acquires his or her target language while interacting with someone who speaks that language. Through interaction with other users on the site, users build their language skills. For instance, they rate, or “grade,” others’ work in the target language as they receive feedback from users who speak and write the languages they wish to learn. They can also engage in video and/or voice chat and communicate directly with native speakers of their target language. Within the environment, the goal would be for both to advance their skills in the target language. Participants in tandem exchanges such as *Livemocha* must be willing to guide their own
learning—to put forth as much effort in helping their partners to advance in their foreign language progress as they wish to receive. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the ultimate goal in the exchanges is for both learners to develop fluency in at least two languages.

In contrast to Livemocha, Second Life is a MUVE (multi-user virtual environment) in which users are free to communicate, build, and explore but in which foreign language pedagogy is not automatically implemented. Rather, it is the responsibility of users in the environment to literally “build” pedagogy into the platform. Since its creation by Linden Lab in 2003, Second Life has experienced a surge in foreign language instruction, and several educators have created virtual foreign language classrooms and laboratories to promote foreign language learning through the program. However, the environment continues to be used for other purposes, and the topic of foreign language learning in the environment could use further development.

Lastly, World of Warcraft is an MMORPG that is not founded on any specific language pedagogical principles but has the capability to promote foreign language acquisition through informal communication with other users. In order to advance to the next level in the game, characters must complete “quests” or “tasks,” gaining various skills and talents along the way. While completing quests, users frequently work in teams and must rely on the help of others (“World of Warcraft,” 2009). Since World of Warcraft is an international game, users may have team members who speak a different language than they do, and they may also choose to join a server based in a different language. In order to communicate effectively in such situations, users are often called on
to learn, or at least to further advance in, a foreign language. Thus, second language learning in this environment may not stem from an explicit desire to learn a new language but from an informal necessity to communicate with other players to accomplish a common goal.

If these platforms are left unexplored, educators may be missing out on the incredible benefits of these learning tools in creating learner autonomy and promoting foreign language learning. As Klaus Schwienhorst (2002) suggests, foreign language learners “should be given the choice of working with a wide range of authentic and personally meaningful language materials, in a number of media” (p. 136). Furthermore, learners should be given means of exploiting these materials in a variety of ways. “As language learners,” Schwienhorst posits, “students should be enabled to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning process” (p. 136). An analysis of different platforms such as Livemocha, Second Life, and World of Warcraft may help educators and students make informed decisions about which media they choose to employ when teaching or learning a foreign language in an increasingly electrerate world.

**Thesis Overview**

To expand on current literature on foreign language learning, this thesis provides a historical perspective of language learning in the MOO and then builds on that research by examining three specific environments in which foreign language learning can take place today: Livemocha, a social networking site; World of Warcraft, a MMORPG; and Second Life, a 3-D online virtual world, or MUVE. My intent with this research is to
explore how foreign language learning can manifest itself in virtual environments with varying pedagogical structures and levels of formality. By “structures,” I mean different pedagogical foundations. *Livemocha*, for instance, is based entirely on the principle of tandem language instruction while *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* were not built on foreign language principles but have the capability to promote language acquisition through communication with other users and direct interaction with the environment.

Following this introduction and literature review, “Chapter 2: Methodology” details the ethnographic and case study approaches I took to complete an in-depth analysis of the three environments outlined above. It provides justification for these methods and explains in detail the specific tasks I undertook in each environment. Additionally, it delves into several theories I used for analysis of the data gathered from the three platforms, including many from gaming, rhetoric, and language learning.

Next, “Chapter 3: History of the MOO and *Second Life*” describes how text-based software in MOOs has paved the way for 3-D platforms such as *Second Life* that have the ability to incorporate foreign language pedagogy. However, this chapter notes that such environments are not necessarily better or worse than MOOs, but different. Additionally, the chapter includes examples gleaned from interviews of ways *Second Life* is currently being used for foreign language instruction and analyzes the environment in terms of several of the theories outlined in the “Methodology” chapter.

The fourth chapter, “Language Learning through *Livemocha,*” describes my study of the social networking site designed primarily around the principle of tandem learning. In this chapter, I explain how tandem learning is implemented in the environment along
with various ways users, including myself, can tailor it to their specific learning goals. As with the previous chapter, this one includes several interviews with users in the environment and analyzes my observations and interview data in light of the theories detailed in the “Methodology” chapter.

The fifth chapter, “Language Learning through World of Warcraft,” details how a game originally designed for entertainment can promote language learning as a byproduct of communication within the environment. It explains my experience participating in the game in both Spanish and English as well as the experiences of other players who have taught and learned a new language in the game. In addition, it explains several features of the environment, such as how to create and customize a character and how to participate in different methods of communication in the environment.

Lastly, the sixth and final chapter, “A Theory of Foreign Language Learning in Virtual Environments,” analyzes my results from the chapters on Second Life, Livemocha, and World of Warcraft in combination. It ties the previous chapters together by explaining my new theory of language learning. This theory, known as electrate language learning (ELL), is grounded in Gregory Ulmer’s (2003) concept of electry and differs from previous theories of language learning because it emphasizes the need for personalized instruction in a foreign language alongside the need for the development of new skills in electronic environments. It then offers several implications for teachers, learners, and researchers before exploring opportunities for future research.
CHAPTER 2:
METHODODOLOGY

To study the pedagogical benefits of *Second Life*, *Livemocha*, and *World of Warcraft*, I relied primarily on qualitative means, which are “descriptive in nature” and “prove useful in framing questions to be explored further, [either] by qualitative research or by other modes of inquiry” (Goubil-Gambrell, 1992, p. 584). The strength of using qualitative methods, rather than quantitative methods which attempt to establish cause-effect relationships, was that they yielded themselves to thick description of the three virtual environments. I purposely chose environments with different levels of foreign language learning integrated into them. *Livemocha*, for example, is based entirely around the principle of tandem learning while *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* have not thus far seen this as a central feature. Examining these three particular environments allowed me to study how virtual platforms that incorporate various levels of pedagogical structure relate to foreign language acquisition.

Because *Second Life*, *Livemocha*, and *World of Warcraft* have been relatively unexplored thus far, particularly in combination, a thick description of the environments was necessary to provide readers with information to determine not only what each environment is capable of but also how and why they might use each for foreign language instruction. To provide this thick description, I utilized a combination of anthropological/ethnographic and case study methods, relying on the definition of ethnography provided by Susan Katz (2002) and the definition of thick description by Clifford Geertz (1973). As Katz stipulates, “ethnography is not a matter of methods—it’s
not the techniques used to gather data—it’s what results from the use of those methods” (p. 24). In other words, ethnography employs a variety of techniques, ranging from surveys and interviews to field notes and observation, but the main goal is to create a thick description that “provides a detailed picture” of a group over an extended period of time (p. 24). Furthermore, ethnography can “explain and refine theory” and “provide teachers with knowledge closer to experience” (Cross, 1994, pp. 130-131, as cited in Katz). In my case, the “detailed picture” of each environment created a structure from which I could interpret the data and present selected findings. My results will hopefully form the basis for further inquiry, which can take place through either quantitative or qualitative methods.

This thick description allowed me to provide a rich narrative of all three environments while also enhancing the reliability and validity my study. Janice Lauer and William Asher (1988) say that undergirding triangulation “is a conception of knowledge as a social construction, a collaborative search, interpretation, and reinterpretation of complex acts in context” (p. 40). In my case, triangulating was especially important considering ethnographies and case studies do not employ random selection of participants, meaning specific results cannot be generalized to the overall population. However, through triangulation, I corroborated my findings. In particular, I used both methods triangulation and theory triangulation. The former involved “checking the consistency of information gathered by different means” while the latter involved “looking at the same data from different perspectives” (Goubil-Gambrell, 1992, p. 589). To ensure the validity of my results, I therefore collected my data using multiple
methods—including participatory observation, field notes, and interviews—and analyzed
the data alongside theories from multiple disciplines, including gaming, rhetoric, and
language learning. Additionally, to ensure the safety and full understanding of all
participants in the study, I acquired IRB approval (see Appendix A). I then provided all
subjects interviewed in person with consent forms and used consent prompts for
participants interviewed in Second Life, Livemocha, or World of Warcraft who could not
physically sign a consent form. All consent prompts were provided in the native language
of the participant, either Spanish or English.

**Participatory Observation**

As Lauer and Asher (1988) suggest, the assumption behind participatory
observation “is that to understand human behavior which occurs in a natural setting, one
must view it as part of that environment” (p. 39). Essentially, I became a participant in
each virtual platform, creating an account and becoming a user of Livemocha, Second
Life, and World of Warcraft. Doing so gave me a direct look at how language learning
occurs in each environment and gave me direct access to other users in each platform. For
consistency’s sake, I focused predominantly on Spanish language exercises in each
environment since I have the most experience with this foreign language and was able to
ask questions to native Spanish speakers in the environments even if their grasp of
English was not sufficient to carry on detailed conversations. Conducting interviews
solely in Spanish and English also ensured that all participants were fully aware of the
circumstances of the study prior to participating as each interviewee was provided a consent form in the language in which he or she was fluent.

As a participant in each environment, I took part in activities completed by the “typical” user of each environment. Since each platform varies considerably in terms of structure, learning curve, and amount of implemented foreign language pedagogy, the types of activities I participated in varied per environment. However, my goal in each environment was to develop the “thick description” Geertz (1973) used in his archeological research by becoming as close as possible to a participant of that environment and interviewing other users in that particular community. Detailed in Table 2.1 on the next page are the more specific tasks I completed and observed in each environment.

**Field Notes**

As I completed language activities in each environment, I took notes of my direct interaction with the environment, comments made by other users, and the features of each environment. In addition, when authorized, I recorded chat logs in all three platforms. These notes served as a record of my interactions and helped me create the “thick description” mentioned earlier.Furthermore, in the instances in which I interviewed users of these environments face-to-face, I recorded and transcribed the interviews with explicit permission. These notes helped to enhance the validity of my study by providing a log of activities, conversations, and overall observations to refer back to when I conducted analysis of all collected data.
Table 2.1. Tasks completed in each environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Second Life</strong></th>
<th><strong>Livemocha</strong></th>
<th><strong>World of Warcraft</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Created a user account and avatar.</td>
<td>Created a user account and profile.</td>
<td>Created a user account and avatar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in class activities designed for foreign language courses,</td>
<td>Completed verbal and audio Spanish exercises created by other users in the</td>
<td>Joined a U.S. server and Latin American server, so that I could play the game in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>particularly those geared toward Spanish. This allowed me to see how foreign</td>
<td>environment. This allowed me to both give and receive feedback to and from</td>
<td>both English and Spanish. Playing on the Latin American server allowed me to interact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language learning can take place in the platform.</td>
<td>native Spanish speakers. Completed a full Spanish 101 course.</td>
<td>with native Spanish speakers and to examine how much of the language I could pick up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited Spanish language <em>sims</em> (short for “simulators,” virtual sites in</td>
<td>Rated, or “graded,” English exercises completed by native Spanish speakers</td>
<td>from interacting directly with other players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Second Life</em>) to see how much Spanish I could acquire in the environment.</td>
<td>learning English. Participated in chatroom dialogue with Spanish speakers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewed both students and professors who use <em>Second Life</em> to teach and/or</td>
<td>Interviewed native Spanish-speaking “friends” on the site, using purposive</td>
<td>Interviewed native English-speaking players on the U.S. realm about their interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acquire a second language. Contacted teachers who use <em>Second Life</em> for foreign</td>
<td>sampling. In other words, I interviewed only those users who approached me for</td>
<td>with non-native English speakers in the game. Interviewed players on the U.S. realm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language instruction via the <em>Second Life</em> educational (SLED) listserv.</td>
<td>language instruction in English and those who responded to my Spanish language</td>
<td>whose native language is not English. Interviewed players on the Latin American realm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>exercises on the site. Sent emails back and forth with users learning English,</td>
<td>whose native language is not Spanish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in both Spanish and English.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examined the motivational impetus for learning in the environment. Specifically,</td>
<td>Examined the motivational impetus for learning in the environment. Specifically,</td>
<td>Examined the motivational impetus for learning in the environment. Specifically, I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I looked at language activities in several foreign language sims and the</td>
<td>I looked at how Mochapoints, points accrued as one completes language exercises,</td>
<td>looked at how “experience points” and “leveling up” motivated users to continue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“rewards” and/or feedback provided from such activities.</td>
<td>motivated users to continue learning in the environment.</td>
<td>learning in the environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews

Using Susan Katz’s (2002) characterization of ethnography, I modified the four types of interviews she used in her study: preparatory, observational, coworker, and discourse-based. Using these interviews, Katz collected data from a variety of participants from all levels of an organization and later developed a detailed analysis of her observational data supported by the interview data. By modifying these interviews, I hoped to gather sufficient background information on foreign language learning within virtual environments, to provide a detailed description of Livemocha, Second Life, and World of Warcraft, and then to provide a rich analysis of my findings for my readers.

The first type of interview, preparatory, is a semi-structured, information-gathering interview that allowed me to gain background information on language learning in MOOs and to provide history of gaming theory. I conducted this type of interview with experts in the aforementioned areas, including Drs. Jan Rune Holmevik and Cynthia Haynes. Additionally, I interviewed professors who have used Livemocha, Second Life, and World of Warcraft for teaching to gauge their reactions to the environments and their success in teaching within them. These interviews provided valuable historical information on language learning in virtual environments, offering definitions of terms of which I was not fully familiar and forming a backbone on which to build the research that followed. With permission, these interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Secondly, observational interviews, which were informal and spontaneous, served as a way to “follow up” on observations I made in the three environments. In Katz’s
(2002) case, observational interviews served as a form of “practical validity” (p. 32) that allowed her to compare her conclusions to the perceptions of those whom she was observing. In my study, they took the form of interviews with users of Livemocha, Second Life, and World of Warcraft as I observed the environments. They essentially tested if what I had observed matched up with any of my developing conclusions. They often took place right before a user completed a task to determine what the user’s goal was. For example, I might ask a World of Warcraft player what her goal was in completing a particular quest, or I would ask a Livemocha user who just scored a 5/5 on a language activity what, if anything, he felt he learned from the exercise.

Next, coworker interviews, which I renamed “interaction interviews,” allowed me to seek clarification of users’ interaction within the three environments, both with one another and with texts and tasks in the environment. These interviews were semi-structured, and like the observational interviews, tested “practical validity” (Katz, 2002, p. 32). For example, if I observed a user in Second Life speaking in a foreign language to another user, but was not sure what was being said, I would interview the first user to determine the interaction that just took place. These interviews helped to ensure that any observations I wrote in my field notes were representative of what actually took place or was said.

Lastly, I modified what Katz (2002) called “discourse-based interviews” to examine how and why users of all three environments write and say certain things in a particular way in chat, email, and in written activities. For example, in her study Katz asked writers why they made certain decisions when composing organizational
documents. In my study, on the other hand, I asked a Livemocha user why he or she chose to learn Spanish on Livemocha instead of elsewhere, why she decided to complete a particular Livemocha course over the other, and/or why she felt her language skills were or were not improving through informal chat conversations with other users on the website. Like the observational and interaction interviews, these helped to prevent assumptions on my part and to validate my observational data by looking at it alongside the interpretations of users of the three platforms I was studying.

**Theories for Analysis**

After completing the observations and interviews in each of the platforms, I began to analyze my data in light of theories from three major areas: gaming, rhetoric, and language learning. More specifically, I looked at my findings in terms of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) flow theory, Richard Bartle’s (1996) four gaming player archetypes, Ian Bogost’s (2007) procedural literacy, Espen Aarsyth’s (1997) conception of ergodic literature and the cybertext, Lloyd Bitzer’s (1968) rhetorical situation, Michel Foucault’s (1972) discourse communities, Aristotle’s (1991) three proofs, and Klaus Schwienhorst’s (2002) characterization of tandem learning. The goal with examining the environments from a multitude of perspectives was primarily to avoid the aforementioned foundationalist approach, in which one theory, or way of viewing reality, was presented as the only way to interpret these environments.

My aim in this analysis is not to suggest that one environment is more appropriate than another for all language learners. Rather, it is to suggest that each environment

offers unique opportunities for language learning depending on the individual characteristics of the intended user and the overarching goals of the creator(s) of the platform. By informing the analysis with multiple theories, my goal is also to explain how previously unidentified patterns and discursive formations come to be and how they contribute to foreign language learning both in digital platforms designed specifically for
language learning and those designed originally for entertainment. Through a multidisciplinary theoretical approach, we can hopefully reexamine traditional, positivistic pedagogical approaches, provide direction for future practice in foreign language teaching and learning, and promote further research in the area.

**Gaming Theory**

*Flow Theory*

Flow theory, originally conceptualized by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1975 (see Figure 2.1), has been studied in depth for the last 35 years in a variety of contexts. It is the idea that learners perform best when their skill set and the difficulty of the task being completed are balanced. When their skill level is too high for a given task, they may become apathetic or bored, whereas they may become anxious or worried if the difficulty of the task is too high for their ability level. However, when skill and challenge are balanced, they reach the “flow channel.” Christina Finneran and Ping Zhang (2002) suggest that in order to achieve flow “the activity must challenge and require skill, merge action and awareness, provide feedback, and require full concentration on the task at hand” (p. 1047). Ideally, flow leads to intrinsic motivation and enjoyment, and learners’ skills advance at the same pace as the difficulty of the activity. When this occurs, people often become “in the zone,” losing track of time without, in many instances, realizing learning is taking place.

Joy Egbert (2003) found that flow can occur in a foreign language classroom. Flow, she says, depends on a variety of factors, including “a deep sense of enjoyment and
‘playfulness’” (p. 561). Additionally, flow depends on individual characteristics, as well as conditions and tasks in the given environment and potentially even other learners in the environment. Furthermore, flow relates to focused attention on a given task, interest in the task, and control over the task (Egbert, pp. 559-561). Flow theory stipulates that individuals will generally repeat an activity if they like it. This means the learner enjoys him or herself while potentially acquiring new information and skills. However, it is important to note Finneran and Zhang’s (2002) point that the multitasking nature of online environments may make it “difficult to pinpoint what one was doing during a particular time period” (p. 1049). This presents a challenge in studying flow electronically because it involves applying “the seemingly very useful flow model to appropriately fit the rather complex computer-mediated environment” (p. 1052). Nevertheless, the potential for flow in virtual environments to help learners acquire foreign language skills makes it a worthy avenue for study in Livemocha, Second Life, and World of Warcraft. Flow theory presents an opportunity to examine whether students may acquire language skills by becoming engrossed both within the environment and by the language tasks themselves.

Player Archetypes

In a 1996 paper entitled “Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDS,” Richard Bartle, a game researcher who developed the first-ever multi-user dungeon (MUD), outlined four main player archetypes for multiplayer online games based on their gaming preferences (Figure 2.2). Operating under the presumption that

different players want different things out of a game, he characterized gamers as one of the following: achievers, explorers, socializers, or killers. Since publication of his original article, the archetypes have been developed into an online test known as the Bartle Test of Gamer Psychology, available for free on the GamerDNA website (refer to Bibliography). Through this test, gamers respond to 30 multiple choice questions to determine their main impetus for participating in online games. As seen in Figure 2.3, the test then describes in detail their main player type.
While there is often overlap between the preferences of each type of player, generally everyone will fall predominantly into one main category. Broadly characterized, achievers are players who are interested in “leveling up” in a game and gaining points. They enjoy “acting on the world” and play to “win” (Bartle, n.d., para. 4). Explorers are mostly interested in the environment of the game, more so than interacting...
with other players or attacking them. As Bartle says, explorers “delight in discovery” and “act on the world” (para. 4). Third, socializers are players who prefer to communicate with others in the game, taking great interest in chat features. In other words, they “like interacting with other players” (para. 4). Lastly, killers are players who enjoy dominating or attacking other players and objects in the game; they “like acting on other players” (para. 4). In a follow-up paper, Bartle added a third dimension to his usual four-player archetypes, implicit/explicit. This new model accounts for both actions that users do without thinking and those they do only after thinking through the potential outcomes. For the purposes of this paper, I focused on his original archetypes as they provided a more simplified method for analysis. When applied to foreign language learning, the player archetypes reveal how each environment may benefit or hinder learning for certain personality types. This, once again, emphasizes that while each environment may appeal to a variety of different learners, it may or may not be ideal for foreign language acquisition depending on that person’s individual preferences and goals.

**Ergodic Literature**

Author of *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth (1997), defines ergodic literature as that which requires “nontrivial effort” to “allow the reader to traverse the text” (p. 1). It differs from literature in the traditional sense in that it is not intended to be read in a linear fashion, from beginning to end. Defined as “a machine for the production of a variety of expression,” a cybertext is a form of ergodic literature that is nonlinear and similar to a labyrinth that offers no set path (p. 3). A text, or game, such
as *World of Warcraft*, for example, starts at a different place depending on one’s character type. Additionally, it is a persistent environment, meaning the game continues with or without a particular player’s participation or presence. This differs from games such as Solitaire, Tetris, or Monopoly in which players must be present in order for the game to continue. It also arguably differs from foreign language software packages like Rosetta Stone that end once someone has completed the series or a traditional foreign language course in which the student leaves the course after passing the final exam or at the end of the semester.

Similarly, while *Livemocha* offers lesson plans that allow a user to advance from “Spanish 101” to more advanced levels, the user can choose to skip ahead and go back to previous lessons or opt out of the lessons entirely, instead participating in chat dialogue with others. *Second Life*, too, offers an experience that does not follow a predetermined route. Users in the environment, called “residents,” have the ability to teleport from place to place, choosing which experience and activities they would like to participate in. While users in each environment can create their own path, that path is not necessarily pre-determined, and the texts do not “end.” In these environments, players, users, and residents “are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard” (Aarseth, 1997, p. 3). Each decision results in routes not taken, of which the user may never know. As Aarseth points out, however, this “inaccessibility” of ergodic literature does not necessarily “imply ambiguity but, rather, an absence of possibility – an aporia” (p. 3) and a form of powerlessness in which the player is at “risk of rejection” (p. 4). It is important to avoid, as Aarseth points out, “technological determinism,” or “the
belief that technology is an autonomous force that causes social change” (p. 14). We must not, in other words, automatically assume that technological advancements are better or more effective in encouraging foreign language learning than previous methods. Instead, we should explore their potential with a critical eye to determine how we can use them alongside previous technologies and forms of learning to make learning as productive as possible.

**Rhetorical Theory**

*Three Proofs*

According to Aristotle (1991), rhetoric is finding the available means of persuasion in each circumstance. To do so, we must keep our audience in mind, evaluating which rhetorical appeals and strategies they will respond to. In certain circumstances, for instance, the audience will react more favorably to *pathos*, or appeal to emotion, rather than to *logos*, or logical reasoning. In other situations, a combination of *pathos* and *logos* might be necessary. But above all, *ethos*, or the appeal to credibility, is necessary. In terms of foreign language platforms, the creators must first analyze their audience and determine which appeals will best catch their attention and make the learning environment appropriate for them. With that said, no environment can appeal to all types of learners, but it can include features that make it more adaptable, or customizable, for the user. *Livemocha*, for instance, allows users to decide which language learning route they would like to take. They can decide between completing a French 201 course from start to finish or bypassing pre-designed lessons entirely, opting
instead to focus solely on live chat. *World of Warcraft* allows players to personalize their avatars, to determine which quests they will complete, and whether or not to join a guild. Similarly, *Second Life* gives users multiple options; as with *World of Warcraft*, they can customize their avatars, explore the terrain to their liking, and pick and choose from a variety of activities to complete.

*Discourse Communities*

Discourse, according to Foucault (1968), determines who can speak, under what circumstances, and to whom. The people and corresponding context of a certain discourse form the basis of a discourse community. Examining *Livemocha, Second Life, and World of Warcraft* as separate discourse communities, we can analyze the ways in which discourse, or language, controls the interactions that take place in each environment. In doing so, we can more closely investigate how the platform itself controls the foreign language acquisition that takes place within it, and the manner in which users choose to acquire language skills in the environment. Additionally, it is possible to look at each platform as its own culture, and in fact, as a dominant digital culture that contains several subcultures. For instance, we can look at the two main factions of *World of Warcraft*, the Horde and the Alliance, and the associated cultural values inherent in each side, or at a Player-vs.-Player (PVP) versus Role-Playing (RP) realms. Also, we can look at how cultural values are formed in *Livemocha* as users engage in live chat and rate each other’s language activities or how residents in *Second Life* form communities as they build and maintain projects in the environment.
According to Lloyd Bitzer (1968), a rhetorical situation is the context in which a particular audience is capable of providing a “fitting response” to an exigence. Within each rhetorical situation, an interplay between the audience, the author, and certain constraints, such as audience members’ beliefs and attitudes toward the task at hand, determines whether or not the “fitting response” will occur, and if so, what it will be. In the case of Livemocha, Second Life, and World of Warcraft, each individual user is both an author and an audience member who brings to the platform an individual set of constraints along with the potential for offering a fitting response. The overriding exigence of the platform differs per environment and per individual. In Livemocha, for instance, the main exigence may be the need for users to learn a new language whereas for Second Life it may be the need for a virtual foreign language lab and for World of Warcraft to reach level 50. However, no matter the exigence, each user brings with him or herself a unique set of constraints—for example, the inability to interact with others who speak the target language in person due to lack of time, physical location, or possibly anxiety when speaking the language. Additionally, each user brings unique skills that will allow him or her to address that exigence. Evaluating these environments under this lens can help us pinpoint what our overriding goal is in each platform and how we can best address it to promote language learning.
Language Learning

Tandem Learning

As noted earlier, tandem learning is the process that occurs when two or more learners team up to teach each other the language in which they are proficient or fluent. Learning in this manner can be described as “a form of open learning” (ParisTech, 2000, para. 3). In addition to working together to develop skills in a target language, tandem partners also “learn more about another’s character and culture,” “help one another improve their language skills,” and “exchange additional knowledge—for example, about their professional life” (ParisTech, para. 3). One of the benefits of this type of learning is authentic interactions with real people accustomed to speaking the language; learners receive the type of feedback necessary to truly understand how their language skills are developing and allowing them to communicate. Tandem exchanges tend to be the most beneficial when partners reciprocate equally, providing mutual support and extending effort to take the advice of their partner. In essence, tandem learning may also teach learners how to manage their time, how to form long-lasting relationships in more than one language, and to take responsibility for their own learning, both within the foreign language context and in other learning situations.

Unlike many traditional forms of learning, tandem learning makes everyone a learner, which can result in lower inhibitions of partners. ParisTech, a collection of 12 French institutes that run an International Tandem Network, reports, “As both partners experience what it is like to be a learner of a language, they are more likely than other speakers to deal with their partner’s problems with a greater sensitivity, patience and
understanding” (ParisTech, 2000, para. 6). Additionally, because each partner is an “expert” in his or her language and culture, he or she can choose which topics to discuss and how to go about correcting his or her partner’s mistakes. On the other hand, tandem learners are not trained as teachers and sometimes may possess an incorrect knowledge of proper forms of communication or grammar (ParisTech, para. 8-9). Additionally, issues may arise when partners’ skill level in the target language varies, and learning becomes more favorable to one partner than another. Nevertheless, the potential for tandem learning to promote learner autonomy, reciprocity, and bilingualism makes it a highly useful method for foreign language acquisition.
CHAPTER 3:
HISTORY OF THE MOO AND SECOND LIFE

The introduction of computer-mediated communication (CMC) practices within the last two decades has broadened people’s ability to interact with one another both in educational and private realms (Yates, 2000). One of the first of such technologies, which has arguably paved the way for virtual environments today, is the MOO. Short for multi-user dungeon/domain (MUD), object-oriented, the MOO is on a technical level “a program running on a machine” (Turbee, 1999, para. 2). It is a “database hosted by a server” that allows users to interact with others in real time while surrounded by textual descriptions of objects and artifacts in the environment (Legenhausen and Kötter, 2000, para. 4). Users “employ text to navigate the virtual space, add to it, and interact synchronously and asynchronously with each other” (Chester, 2006, p. 128).

History of the MOO

MOOs originally stemmed from old dungeons and dragons multi-user software, which began in 1978 with Richard Bartle and Rob Trubshaw at Essex University in England (Holmevik, 2004). Pavel Curtis, then a member of Xerox Palo Alto Research Center Incorporated, later made the first major step toward a truly text-based “world” when he developed LambdaMOO in 1990 (Holmevik, 2004; “Pavel Curtis,” 2009; “What is a MOO?”, n.d). Although MOOs are technical in the sense that they are programmable and run by software, what truly defines the MOO is its social aspect, or the ability for inhabitants within the MOO to interact with one another. Users connect to each other
through the MOO from anywhere in the world and communicate in real time, forming powerful relationships both with the environment and with each other (Turbee, 1997). Thus, a MOO becomes “a place where imagination, individual power and sociability blend; it transforms and is transformed by its creators” (Turbee, para. 2). As users interact in the environment, they take part in creating it. Thus, they have a stake in the interactions that take place within it.

Similar to Turbee (1997), Cynthia Haynes, co-author of MOOniversity and High Wired, classifies the MOO as “a community of people” (personal communication, January 17, 2010). The beauty of a MOO, she says, is that users have options; they can be a builder, a programmer, or a wizard. In other words, they can create objects that have already been programmed, program the objects themselves, or “run the show, like the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain” (Haynes). Along with the ability to choose how to
interact within the environment, users have free reign with their imaginations. As they enter rooms in a MOO, they are provided with descriptions of what they “see” (refer to Figure 3.1), and they are then allowed to interpret the descriptions to their liking. As MOO users “interact with their environment by getting, moving, giving, and examining objects” (Chester, 2006, p. 129), they construct their own virtual space and, in many instances, their own virtual identity. If we agree with Heidegger (1949) that being is a suspension, that we constantly propel ourselves forward to attain some better version of our being, then we can easily see the appeal of the MOO.

Indeed, within the MOO users are free to “reinvent themselves…liberated from physical constraints” such as race, ethnicity, gender and age (Chester, 2006, p. 129). As Andrea Chester’s study suggests, this ability to form a new, virtual identity encourages “self-representation and playfulness,” which is “further underscored by the use of screen names” (p. 129). Because of the perceived anonymity and playfulness in the MOO, many users experience reduced inhibition, or decreased shyness, in the environment. For normally inhibited individuals, this characteristic of the MOO can be particularly helpful in a learning scenario. Chester found, for example, that most students in a Japan-based, English language MOO experienced “benign dishinibition,” or reduced shyness and increased confidence. Several students’ comments on their experience in the MOO reveal this reduction in shyness:

I was able to…talk about anything and pipe up whenever I wanted because of a detachment from the IPR [in-person-relationship] world…my inhibitions were relaxed. I could
“bump” into people in the MOO and just start a conversation, something I cannot do in the face to face world. (Robotics, as cited in Chester, p. 133)

On the Internet I was more confident, I guess that’s because I was not talking...to their faces. (Ice_Maiden, as cited in Chester, p. 133)

Along with the propensity for creativity and playfulness, the disinhibiting effect of the MOO has led to its introduction into educational settings. Through the MOO platform, learners are able to engage in self-expression and direct interaction with others, thereby acquiring new knowledge and skills in an engaging virtual medium. As Haynes and Holmevik (2001) posit, “MOOs reinvent the notion of education, and their users reconceive this space to accommodate radically different genres of discourse and pedagogies” (p. 4).

Educational MOOs

The first educational MOO that fell under this description was Diversity University MOO. Established by Jeanne MacWhorter in 1993, this MOO was the first designed specifically for teaching students. Although MacWhorter originally intended the MOO solely for social workers, she quickly realized the multidisciplinary potential of the environment (Chester, 2006; Holmevik & Haynes, 2000). Quickly thereafter, a wide range of educational MOOs emerged. One example is Lingua MOO, created by Haynes
and Holmevik in 1995. Lingua MOO, according to Holmevik (2004), came in response to the need for a learning environment that would:

- Facilitate collaboration.
- Encourage communication.
- Stimulate the students’ interest in reading and writing.
- Transcend geographical and cultural barriers.
- Be a fun and creative place to work and socialize.
- Provide a space in which to conduct as well as present collaborative research and writing. (p. 200)

Because of the informal nature of the MOO, it came to provide a space where students could interact without the pressure of face-to-face communication and where they could speak up at any time. This, in turn, enabled many students who ordinarily would not participate in classroom discussion to finally engage in their learning. Legenhausen and Kötter (2002) explain the reasoning behind this phenomenon in “Virtual Classrooms in Foreign Language Learning – MOOs as Rich Learning Environments”:

Like in a chatroom, but unlike a four-walled classroom, everyone in the MOO has an equal chance of speaking up since nobody can prevent another person from contributing to an ongoing discussion. This leveling off of status differences can have an extremely liberating effect on shy or timid students who would not dare raise their hands in
traditional classroom interactions...Learners can take their
time to compose a message, while the lack of visual
information about themselves can likewise provide people
with a feeling of ease and comfort that they may not
necessarily experience in a face-to-face setting. (para. 9)

Without the pressure to communicate in person, many students and teachers have
found within the MOO an avenue for finally engaging in their learning. In many cases,
MOOs reduce the complexity of a traditional classroom and level the hierarchy of both
teacher versus student as well as extroverted versus introverted students. As Holmevik
suggests, in a real face-to-face scenario, some people are more prone to talk than others.
Therefore, “the MOO evens things out. If you use both in a class, then you really cater to
both groups” (personal communication, January 26, 2010). Haynes reiterates this point
when she says that an educational MOO should never be used in isolation. Rather, ideally
a MOO should be balanced with face-to-face instruction (personal communication,
January 27, 2010). Although perceiving education in binaries (computer-based
instruction versus face-to-face instruction, or traditionalist versus constructionist
approaches, for example) is often easy, these comments suggest we should resist these
simplistic divisions in order to move toward approaches that capitalize on the benefits of
each side.
Foreign Language MOOs

The ability to “even things out” and create a learning environment that eliminates traditional obstacles to communication is partly what led to the development of foreign language MOOS. The less-threatening nature of a MOO enables students to ask for help when learning a foreign language, to look up unfamiliar words and phrases without the other users’ knowledge, and to take their time composing messages in the target language. Markus Kötter (2003), for example, found that as many as 50% of American students, as well as more than a third of German students, in the English-German MOO MOOssiggang asked their partners to translate items for them in their target language (para. 45). Additionally, many students asked their tandem language partners to paraphrase information in their target language and asked for an explanation in their L1.

Although her students did not use MOOs specifically, Margaret Healy Beauvois (1998) found similar results in a study of native English-speaking students using networked computers to learn French. She noticed, for example, that the virtual space tended to distress students and facilitate self-expression. Additionally, she noticed that students tended to code-switch, or switch from French back to English, less often in the online environment than face-to-face. The majority of students also reported increased output in the second language and “attributed high output to the fact that they had time to reflect before writing” (p. 104). They also had more opportunities to initiate conversations; thus, learning became more student-focused because learners were not simply responding to teacher’s prompts but creating their own. Furthermore, the emphasis moved away from memorization to an emphasis on communication. Students in
the environment rarely reverted back to English because they saw this as a form of “cheating,” or a way of sending a message incorrectly. In the traditional French classroom, however, Healy Beauvois’s students often switched to English when they became flustered or could not think of an appropriate response.

These results are mirrored in similar studies of foreign learning in tandem language MOOs. Legenhausen and Kötter (2002), for instance, examined a German-English MOO in which learners encountered “numerous opportunities to engage in negotiation of meaning and to practice routines such as asking for clarifications, check that others have understood what they said, and re-formulations of their own ideas in response to requests for repetitions or paraphrases” (para. 10). Although learners may encounter problems in foreign language MOOs, such as miscommunication or difficulty keeping up with the fast pace of text, the rewards seem to outweigh the drawbacks. Klaus Schwienhorst (2004), for instance, discovered that learners in an English-German MOO tended to ask much more wh- (who, what, when, where, and why) than yes/no questions in the environment (p. 46). That is, they asked questions of their language partners that would elicit more in-depth responses in the target language, which allowed learners, in turn, to practice their language skills more and to avoid miscommunication. Additionally, students rarely used evasive strategies in the MOO (Schwienhorst, 2002). In other words, they rarely ignored a partner’s utterance, opting instead to guess at the meaning when appropriate. Doing so would allow for, at the minimum, “partial understanding” in the target language (Schwienhorst, 2002, p. 139).
One of the reasons MOOs have been so successful in educational settings, particularly for foreign language learning, is their informal nature. Holmevik summarizes the benefits of informal learning in the MOO in the following way:

The informality of it all helps to break down some of the anxieties that learners have, especially in regard to foreign languages. We all get kind of self-conscious about things like pronunciation, and grammar, and so on, so being behind the screen, having the sort of veil of anonymity, helps. Also the environment is such that it’s very informal as opposed to a traditional classroom where you have the authority of the room being designed into the room.

(personal communication, January 26, 2010)

The MOO breaks down conventions that the physical classroom has actually built into the walls, into its very configuration. In a traditional classroom, for example, the authority figure is usually at the front of the room. Communication is predominantly teacher-centered, with students responding only to the teacher’s requests. The traditional classroom is also organized in such a way that all the chairs face the teacher, but in the MOO no such directionality exists. As Holmevik goes on to say,

In the MOO anybody can speak to anybody without asking.

It’s just much more conducive to informal communication.

And I think if you look at how language is learned in a real-world scenario, you learn it in informal settings. You go to
a restaurant, and you order some things, and you learn how to do that. You go into a store, and you buy something, and you learn through the exchange process and also by listening to native speakers you pick up on things. So I think the MOO does, and has always had, that ability to encourage those things. (personal communication, January 26, 2010)

Although foreign language MOOs have been hailed for their ability to promote foreign language learning (see Legenhausen & Kötter, Schwienhorst, and Turbee), they are quickly being replaced by flashier three-dimensional digital environments. While Pavel Curtis’s LambdaMOO still exists, for example, its membership now falls well below the 10,000 it had at the height of its popularity (“What is a MOO?”, n.d.). There are now multiple platforms that allow for quicker communications and provide what Haynes terms “sexier” three-dimensional graphics along with the two-dimensional text provided by MOOs (personal communication, January 27, 2010). However, what many of these new environments lack is the users’ participation in the design and the users’ ability to invent the parameters of the environment through their imaginations.

Therefore, we must resist the temptation to assume that 3-D graphics surpass 2-D text in terms of providing educational benefit. As Gilly Salmon (2008) suggests, it is not necessary to completely reinvent the pedagogical wheel. Rather, we should “reach back to our most abiding and productive educational models to inform our learning design” (Salmon, p. 530). As mentioned previously, it is important to avoid what Espen Aarseth
(1997) terms “technological determinism,” or “the belief that technology is an autonomous force that causes social change” (p. 14). We should not, in other words, assume that just because new virtual platforms are “sexier” or contain 3-D graphics that they are somehow more effective at promoting foreign language learning than their predecessors such as the MOO. Instead, we should evaluate each environment for its potential in enhancing learning for particular individuals and to determine which features of each we can implement going forward.

The goal in creating and using any virtual environment for foreign language learning is to keep our audience in mind and to create meaningful tasks that will allow them to explore their imaginations. One platform that seems to draw on many of the benefits of language learning in MOOs while also incorporating video, audio, and graphic technology is Second Life. While this platform may not be ideal for all learners, it is undeniably becoming a force to be reckoned with in educational settings. To date, this platform “offers the most powerful object creation toolset of any 3-D MUVE,” or multi-user virtual environment (Salmon, p. 528). As of June 2007, over 100 universities in the United States and other countries had a virtual presence in Second Life (Baker, Wentz, & Woods, 2009, p. 60), and many researchers predict all universities will have an educational presence in the platform within five years (Salt, Atkins, & Blackal, 2008). Whether or not this will be the case is uncertain, but its current popularity and ability to enhance learning in a variety of areas, particularly foreign language learning, make it an appropriate site for further investigation.
What is Second Life?

In the broadest sense, Second Life is a three-dimensional virtual world accessible through the Internet. According to Brian White (2008), author of Second Life: A Guide to Your Virtual World, defining Second Life is difficult. It is at once an MMORPG with no quests, “a glorified chat room,” and “the 3-D Internet” (p. 4). Created by Linden Lab in 2003, Second Life is a space that enables its users, called residents, to “socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade virtual property and services with one another, or travel throughout the world, which residents refer to as the grid” (“Second Life,” 2009, para. 1). Second Life has been characterized as “like RL
Life], only you can fly” and is likened to “The Sims On-Line™ on steroids” (White, p. 4).

Whether or not Second Life can be classified as a game is often a matter of debate. It is a game to the extent that it is an entertaining virtual world where users can interact with one another as avatars, but unlike typical online games, Second Life involves no quests, nor any levels” or “points.” Within the environment, no set goals exist unless residents decide to create them for themselves. Steven Warburton (2009) explains this unique nature of Second Life in the following way:

There is no natural purpose unless one is created or built.

Here, social interaction exists not as a precursor to goal-oriented action but rather, it occurs within an open-ended system that offers a number of freedoms to the player. (p. 416)

Along with the freedom to create goals for oneself—or conversely to wander around without any particular goal in mind—what separates Second Life from many other virtual environments is the ability for users to build (or “rez”) objects in the space. Unlike the objects in the aforementioned MOOs, objects in Second Life are three-dimensional (see Figure 3.3). Called prims, or primitives, these objects are basic geometric shapes that users combine to form more complex shapes. Once created, objects can be further modified by adding textures. Additionally, users can incorporate scripting language to the shapes that “add functionality” to the environment (“Second Life,” 2009, para. 2). For instance, a user can apply “gravity” to an object that makes it hang closer to the ground or
“spin” to a virtual skirt to make it bounce as an avatar moves about. These features are useful in an educational setting because they allow users to tailor the learning environment to their particular foreign language needs. A foreign language instructor, for instance, may create an interactive object that speaks to an avatar in German or construct an entire foreign language lab within Second Life where users can sit and chat with native speakers.
Using outside software, residents can also create animations and gestures that give their avatars more lifelike characteristics, such as the ability to smile, wave, or dance. Having such a wide range of options within the environment provides many opportunities for residents to create unique learning spaces and to craft a virtual version of themselves or, conversely, to experiment with other forms of being. William C. Diehl and Esther Prins (2008), for instance, found that Second Life provides avenues for students to experiment with shifting views of cultural identity. For students learning a foreign language for future interaction with people from other cultures, this is especially important. Diehl and Prins also discovered that Second Life fosters “use of multiple
languages, cross-cultural encounters and friendships, greater awareness of insider cultural perspectives, and openness towards new viewpoints signified by skin color, facial features, hair texture, clothing and the like” (p. 101). Furthermore, Second Life users are able to move freely from one part of the virtual world to another, making interaction with a variety of users possible and creating “rich opportunities for cross-cultural contact” (Diehl & Prins, p. 104).

Through direct interaction with the virtual environment and with other residents, Second Life lends itself to the formation of virtual communities just as social MOOs do. As Tom Atkinson (2008) says, “Second Life helps create a sense of class community that keeps students engaged in learning” (p. 28). For international students, this seems especially true: “They overcome shyness during discourse and demonstrate less fear of speaking and interacting by channeling their feelings and ideas through their avatars” (Atkinson, p. 28). Although Second Life has voice chat capabilities, many users rely on text chat. Similar to text chat in the MOO, text chat in Second Life prevents many students from worrying about “dominating the discussion, interrupting others or hesitating to respond” (Lamont, 2007, as cited in Atkinson, p. 28). This, in turn, can lead to more fruitful dialogue in the environment, which can promote learning and self-expression.

The Basics

When creating a Second Life account, users choose a first name for their avatar, and Second Life then provides a list of available last names from which to choose. Next,
users choose a default avatar, which they can later adapt to any form they wish—an animal, a vegetable, a monster, an alien, a person resembling themselves, or an entirely new person. Avatars may even take more abstract forms, such as a lamppost or a clock. Indeed, “every aspect of an avatar is customizable” (“Second Life,” 2009, para. 12), from the avatar’s hair, body shape, skin color, makeup, and clothes to the way they walk and the manner in which they interact with the environment and other avatars. Users can change their avatars’ appearance as often as they would like, and they may also create multiple accounts and represent multiple residents simultaneously. In terms of foreign language learning, this customization gives users the freedom to create a new virtual identity that may lead to the lowered inhibition Chester (2006) discovered in the MOO. It
also provides a means for experimenting with cultural signifiers with native speakers of the target language. For example, I used the first avatar I created, Sophy Cascarino (Figure 3.7), to interact with native Spanish speakers in the environment because I had designed her as a Spanish flamenco dancer in a Visual Communication course I took as part of my master’s degree. As such, I identified her as a “Spanish speaker” and used her specifically to communicate with native Spanish speakers in the environment. This gave me experience identifying with a new cultural group and encouraged me to speak Spanish
in the platform. The ability to literally transform oneself from a flamenco dancer to a businesswoman to a ferret or whatever one desires within seconds allows residents to experiment with different ways of being and interacting within a virtual world. This, in turn, can lead to more productive interactions in which they are not concerned with ordinary constraints such as physical appearance, shyness, or even language ability. This can make for more effective communication in the environment, in which residents focus
more on the communication process than on any communication filters that are ordinarily in place face-to-face.

*Communication*

Communication between users in *Second Life* takes place in several ways: through chat, instant message, voice chat, and gestures/animations. Chat is text-based communication, akin to text in a chatroom or a MOO. It is public and “heard” by all nearby avatars. Instant message (IM), on the other hand, is only seen (“heard”) by private parties, but it is heard by those parties no matter their current location in the virtual world. Additionally, users can join group chat in which only members of that group can see and/or hear the communication taking place. These different chat layers represent discursive formations in which residents can pick and choose whom they would like to communicate with and in what manner. Several social layers overlap as residents can see group chat, local chat, and private messages in the same window panel, as seen in Figure 3.8. Voice chat takes place via microphone and can be heard by all nearby avatars or privately, depending on the user’s selected preferences. Gestures and animations are a way for residents to enhance both their text- and voice-based communication as well as a means for transmitting non-verbal messages to nearby avatars. Through these methods, avatars are able to socialize, connect, and create objects together. As in the MOO, groups of users, or residents, tend to form communities in which they literally construct their own environment while interacting with one another in a variety of ways.
The creation of a social network within Second Life can enhance language learning in the platform in several ways. First, it may take the focus off learning a target language and place it instead on completing a task unrelated to the language. In this way, residents may pick up on target language skills through informal interaction in the environment rather than on language exercises. In doing so, they may encounter informal language skills that mirror the language they would encounter in a face-to-face environment. However, they are able to make mistakes without the face-to-face pressure they would ordinarily experience in a traditional classroom environment. Secondly, Second Life allows learners and teachers to implement foreign language pedagogy in the
space by literally building activities into the environment, as two professors I interviewed in the environment chose to do.

**Examples of Foreign Language Instruction**

Dr. Christopher Luke (Figure 3.9), an associate professor of foreign language education at Ball State University in Indiana, has used Second Life for about two years to teach Spanish. He uses the Ball State Languages island, which is designed specifically for language instruction in a variety of languages. The island is divided into different “quarters,” or sections, for particular languages. For example, there is an Asian languages section, a French quarter, and a Spanish quarter, among others. As one enters the island, he or she is greeted with a message conducive to a comfortable language learning
environment: “Welcome to the Language and Culture Center at Ball State University. All visitors are encouraged to use a language other than their native one. Please be supportive of all language learners at all levels.”

Within the island, students can partake in structured, semi-structured, and unstructured language learning exercises. For instance, they can complete language exercises built into the platform based on the week (or *semana*) of the month (see Figure 3.10), simply walk around the island, or even dance, sing, and chat on a virtual dance
platform and tapas bar. In Luke’s first two semesters using *Second Life* for foreign language instruction, he used it primarily for homework assignments to complement a more traditional Spanish classroom. However, in his third semester, he taught an entire Spanish 202 class in *Second Life*. In reference to his first semester teaching, he said the following:

**Profesor Juran:** We would send the students on in-world field trips and then have them work on related activities.

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**Profesor Juran:** For example, we simulated a “Spring Break” and they went to Paris in SL. They then talked/typed about RL experiences with Spring Break.

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**Profesor Juran:** In our first attempt at using SL, we actually gave the students more points for seeking out and speaking with native speakers rather than just working with classmates

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**Profesor Juran:** The students that worked primarily with native speakers had favorable responses about the experience

Within the platform, students have the opportunity to communicate both with native speakers and teachers and students from their own class. Because of the wide range of tasks, residents, and *sims*, they also can pick and choose whom they communicate with and where, varying between less structured interaction with native speakers outside of the educational island and more structured activities within the university’s island. This flexibility allows *Second Life* to appeal to a wider variety of
students while allowing them to engage with real people within the platform. When asked what he felt the major benefits of using *Second Life* for foreign language instruction are as opposed to a traditional, face-to-face classroom, Luke said “the flexibility that SL provides, the uniqueness of the environment, the autonomy that students can have, plus the potential for communication across the world” (personal communication, February 3, 2010). He was quick to note, however, that *Second Life* is not for all learner types:

**Profesor Juran:** I don’t think, though, that SL is for everyone, but I think it does appeal to a certain type of learner.

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**Profesor Juran:** I think SL, is like any other venue/approach...it sis another option in trying to find what works best with individual learners

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**Profesor Juran:** I think it appeals somewhat to learners who are looking for a new experience.  
**Profesor Juran:** I think it also has potential for distance education courses.  
**Profesor Juran:** A really good use might be summer school, when students want to go home to work, but still be able to take a class. SL allows that to happen

Similar to Luke, Dr. James Abraham (Figure 3.11), a professor at Glendale Community College in Phoenix, Arizona, uses a university island to teach his students Spanish. Thanks to a grant-provided sabbatical, he was able to create “an entire virtual Mexican town that includes educational spaces for role-playing, native speaker meetings, grammar and pronunciation practice, cultural understanding, and conversational practice using robots with artificial intelligence” (Maricopa Center for Learning & Instruction,
2010, para. 6). Within the island, residents can interact with several pre-programmed “robots” that initiate prompts in the target language. As seen in Figure 3.12, for example, my avatar interacts with a Spanish-speaking pharmacist who asks her to describe the symptoms she is experiencing. He then asks her follow-up questions before recommending medications for her. Although this is a simulation, rather than a direct interaction with another human, it demonstrates the incredible potential of Second Life to create meaningful language activities that can later be applied to real life learning scenarios. As each student interacts with the pharmacist, he or she will likely take a different path, describing his or her symptoms differently and receiving different
medications. This task is just one of many in Abraham’s island that simulate a realistic cultural experience in a virtual environment. One of the most impressive features of the island is that users can see and hear the Spanish word for a variety of objects in the space. For instance, when they visit the *mercado*, or market, in the island, they see the Spanish name for each food item (see Figure 3.13).

According to the Maricopa Center for Learning & Instruction (2010), Abraham “views Second Life as a platform that, when combined with good pedagogical methods, can transform education and add another tool to the educator’s belt” (para. 6). This echoes Haynes’ assertion that electronic environments should serve as a complement to
other forms of learning, rather than replacing them entirely (personal communication, January 27, 2010). Platforms like Second Life offer new opportunities for engaging students with foreign language content while responding to a diverse rhetorical situation.

**Examining Second Life**

Rhetorically, Second Life is responding to an exigence for an increasingly diverse virtual space that has great appeal for a variety of audience members. Each user brings with him or herself a certain number of constraints, ranging from prior computer experience, attitude toward virtual interaction, and willingness to learn in a new environment. In terms of audience, Second Life must cater to a wide range of people. As of 2007, “38% of users were 25-34 years old, 26% were 18-24, and 22% were 35-44
(22%), while 57% were male and 43% were female” (Diehl & Prins, 2008, p. 103).

Additionally, residents come from around the globe and speak a variety of languages. While English is the primary language in Second Life, many users meet in areas where other languages are spoken. Searches for Spanish, German, French, or Hindi, for instance, lead to several locations where those languages dominate. These places include virtual bars, shops, classrooms, schools, and music venues, among others (Diehl & Prins).

Although no set goals are built into the Second Life platform, residents can create goals for themselves or for their students. For example, Scott Grant, a lecturer and language educator at Monash University in Australia, designed a Chinese language sim in which
students must order a certain number of Chinese dishes utilizing the Chinese skills they have gained in their face-to-face class (see Figure 3.14). As students click on different meals, they hear and see the Chinese names for the ingredients. This type of activity is likely one that would appeal to Bartle’s (1996) characterization of an achiever who thrives on completing activities that allow them to advance in a game-like setting. Socializers, on the other hand, would respond to the interactive nature of Second Life, relishing in the real-time chatroom type dialogue. For these residents, Second Life offers a wealth of opportunities for interaction – not only for foreign language learning but also for almost any educational or private experience possible. Explorers have ample opportunity to explore Second Life’s thousands of sims. While “killing” in Second Life is not allowed in the traditional sense of the word, certain users delight in harassing others in the environment—much as occurs in “real life.”

In terms of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) flow theory, Second Life has the capability to encourage improvement in a variety of tasks at a rate favorable to residents. They can choose, for instance, to partake in building exercises or not, depending on their skill level. In terms of a classroom environment in Second Life, determining flow is difficult because the difficulty and interactive nature of each task varies considerably per island and individual. However, it is reasonable to postulate that playfulness, a component of flow, can and does occur in the environment as residents interact with one another and build. As Luke said in his interview regarding language learning in the platform, differentiating between “addiction” and “flow” in the environment may be difficult (personal communication, February 3, 2010). Many residents spend hours each week in Second
Life without necessarily “learning” anything, but simply exploring the space. Similarly, many residents spend short amounts of time in the environment but acquire a variety of new skills. Flow in this environment is a topic that should definitely be explored further but based on my personal experience in the space cannot be definitively stated to exist or not.

What is known is that Second Life has the ability to place more responsibility for learning on students who create their own avatars, explore new locations for themselves, and report on what they have discovered; the teacher does not simply stand at the front of the room, ready to spew forth knowledge into students’ heads. In “Relinquishing Authority: Tapping into Students’ Cognitive Skills Through Familiar Content and Virtual Worlds,” Barbara Geiger and Kristian Rickard (2000) posit that virtual classes can eliminate many of the boundaries that typical classrooms involve, thereby producing a class that allows for freedom and creativity. In such an environment, students become the “knowledge managers,” deciding ways of learning that are most effective for them, not for the teacher. Along with encouraging learning responsibility, Second Life offers many opportunities for students to reflect on their foreign language interaction and learning. For example, students have quick reference to chat logs that allow them to refer back to class discussions.

In addition to taking charge of their own learning in Second Life, students have a medium to build or “program.” Stuart Moulthrop (n.d.) argues that the ability to build, and play, is a component necessary to “blend the identity of the receiver with that of designer or author” (p. 208). Media such as Second Life provide a framework on which students
can *intervene*, rather than simply partake, in their foreign language learning. When students create and play, they begin to associate learning with fun, and learning becomes less of a burden. Through group building activities in *Second Life*, instructors can help students view language learning as a collaborative process, an aspect of learning Leanne B. Warshauer (2000) stipulates is imperative for success in the classroom. In *Second Life*, students can see immediate results of collaborative work, providing a reward system that makes learning both educational and enjoyable.

In an increasingly multicultural, multilingual world, *Second Life* allows the virtual foreign language classroom to serve as a safe place for social differences to be negotiated and, in some cases, eliminated altogether. As occurs in the foreign language MOO, anonymity in *Second Life* allows many reticent students to thrive as they are “hidden” behind a virtual persona, free to communicate without fear of social repercussions. Along the same vein, many students feel more comfortable communicating in a virtual classroom that can potentially eliminate traces of race, class, or gender. Female students who are typically unassertive in a traditional, face-to-face classroom, for example, can take on the role of a virtual man. Additionally, *Second Life* can help students simulate the real world, allowing them to see things and places they would not ordinarily because of time and money constraints. Students can hold discussions with Freud, for example, or fly to Amsterdam in a matter of seconds.

Students have potential to form a sense of community through a virtual medium, both with each other and with their teacher, possibly creating a more participatory, democratic forum for class discussion, which Matt Hermans (2000) asserts is necessary if
we wish to make students “care” about their learning. In terms of foreign language learning, this gives students a social framework to fall back on when they encounter difficulty with the target language, and allows them to do so in an environment where they can explore issues regarding power, ethics, intellectual property, and community (deWinter & Vie, 2000). As Dan Ding (2000) posits, to teach writing is to teach culture. To teach writing in Second Life is, by the same token, to teach the culture of a technological medium. In the age of technological hybridity, it is imperative that we teach students to be multimodal and electrate; Second Life provides an array of opportunities for teachers and students to literally build their own pedagogy and to find ways most effective for them to learn a foreign language.
CHAPTER 4:
LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH LIVEMOCHA

Livemocha is a global social networking site with an emphasis on learning a foreign language. On this Web 2.0 platform, users teach others the language(s) they are proficient in while receiving individualized help from people who speak the language(s) they wish to learn. In a general sense, Web 2.0 refers to “applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web” (“Web 2.0,” 2010). Livemocha falls under this definition because it emphasizes interactive, collaborative language building activities and does so through a readily accessible medium, the Internet.

According to Marji McClure (2009), Livemocha’s approach — “a combination of technologies working together on a Linux platform — enables members to have a much more interactive experience than they would through independent learning with traditional print textbooks” (p. 10). Livemocha, in essence, moves language learning from the realms of strict memorization and regurgitation of patterns and facts to a focus on interaction and communication with real-life speakers of one’s target language. Founded in February 2007 by Indian natives Shirish Nadkarni and Krishnan Seshadrinathan, Livemocha is a direct response to “the need for language learning around the globe” (McClure, p. 10) and the need for language skills that have direct impact on one’s life outside the classroom. As Nadkarni says, “As we operate in a more globalized world, we need to become more proficient in other languages so we can do business in other parts of the world” (as cited in McClure, p. 10).
According to Nadkarni (2009), the name *Livemocha* comes from “brainstorming sessions” in Seattle-based cafés in which he and Seshadrinathan went over the details and the product plan for the site. The result of these discussions is a foreign language learning platform that is more “robust” and “creative” than the traditional language classroom. As Nadkarni posits,

To become proficient in a language, you need to be able to interact with native speakers. You need to be able to practice….With the Internet being prevalent across the world and the availability of broadband, VoIP [Voice over Internet Protocol] and social networking technologies, we could combine a unique approach to learning a language that combines engaging content with the ability for you to interact with native speakers who could help you better practice your conversational skills and give you feedback.

(as cited in McClure, p. 10)

While utilizing social networking technology to teach foreign languages, *Livemocha* relies heavily on the principle of tandem learning. Broadly defined, tandem learning is the process whereby two people with complementary language skills learn the other’s language through mutually beneficial interaction (Chung, Graves, Weshce, & Barfurth, 2005). Thus, an Irish learner of Spanish may be combined with a Puerto Rican learner of English so that the two can learn from each other, “alternating between the role of L2 learner and L1 expert either face-to-face, by e-mail, via chat systems or the MOO, [or] by
audio- or video-conferencing” (Schwienhorst, 2003, p. 431). Building heavily on this concept, *Livemocha* operates closely alongside the three basic tenets of tandem learning: reciprocity, bilingualism, and autonomy (Campbell, 2003, para. 9).

Learner autonomy, or the capacity of the learner to “develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning” (Little, 1991, p. 4), stems from responsibility for one’s own learning and the subsequent capability of reflecting on that learning. Within tandem learning environments, learner autonomy is closely aligned with the concept of reciprocity, the idea that “each learner has to support their partner as much as they wish to support themselves” (Schwienhorst, 2003, p. 431). Along the same lines, tandem learning incorporates the concept of bilingualism, or the ability to speak two languages, and to choose which language is appropriate for a particular linguistic context.

Within *Livemocha*, the tandem learning process is accomplished primarily “through peer reviewing of submissions, live text and audio conversations, and other learning systems” (“Livemocha,” 2009, para. 1). For instance, a speaker fluent in French might want to learn Spanish. Through the site, that user can teach a Puerto Rican member some French and be tutored in Spanish in return. As *Livemocha* posits, the site runs on a “return the favor” dynamic; in order to receive continued help with their own foreign language acquisition, users must provide feedback for others (“Smell the Coffee,” 2008, para. 3). Furthermore, the design of the platform is “rooted in several…theoretical backgrounds, specifically sociocultural theory by Vygotsky (1978)” (para. 6), which presupposes that human development is highly tied to a social dimension. In particular,
“text, audio, and video chat with like-minded learners in Livemocha contributes to several benefits consistently emphasized in literature about CMC: an opportunity to produce comprehensible output to make oneself understood (Leahy, 2004), heightened noticing of problematic language production…and ultimately increased input, output, and negotiation of meaning in the SLA (Kern, 1995)” (as cited in Jee & Park, para. 7).

Overall, Livemocha is designed to emphasize social interaction in a tandem learning environment. For example, “while users can study a language solely through the type of lessons typically found on instructional CD-ROM programs, they are encouraged to use the site’s search function to identify and contact native speakers of their target language” (Naone, 2007, para. 3). While users can actively search for language partners on the site, the site itself also suggests friends for users as they submit language exercises. As seen in Figure 4.1, after submitting their work users have the option of selecting which “friends” from around the globe they would like to “grade” or “evaluate” their recently completed exercise. These suggested friends are typically users who speak and write the other user’s target language at a higher proficiency level. For instance, a native French speaker learning beginner’s German would likely be paired with a fluent or native German speaker who wishes to learn French.

Furthermore, as users complete multiple exercises in a row, the site requests that they take a break to evaluate the work of other users. This, in turn, creates a give-and-take method whereby users must help others in order to further develop their own language skills. As Naone (2007) says, “The social-network aspect of the site [keeps] users motivated as they form friendships with native speakers” (para. 4). Additionally,
the direct interaction with other users in the environment creates a form of social pressure that encourages learners to improve their target language skills so they can not only interact more effectively with their online friends but also so they can complete more language exercises and receive positive feedback on those exercises. Nadkarni sums this social process of *Livemocha* up by saying

> I can look at people’s profiles, see how engaged they are in the process, where they are in the lesson plan, and how active they are in the community. From there, I can truly
build a list of study partners that are as motivated as I am to learn. (as cited in Naone, para. 4).

In this sense, users in *Livemocha* have control over their own language learning because they choose who will help them in that process and to what extent. Additionally, if a user desires to truly learn a new language, he or she must put forth the effort to assist others in their foreign language goals.

**The Basics**

The log-on process for *Livemocha* is simple and free. After creating an account, a user can choose a language, and if he or she can handle the linguistic challenge, choose more than one. Using text, audio, and video inputs, the student has several options when learning a language in *Livemocha* (“Smell the Coffee,” 2009, para. 6). As shown in Figure 4.2, in each lesson users first learn vocabulary through visual and auditory cues. They then review vocabulary with exercises, write text based on the vocabulary just learned, and submit it to the *Livemocha* community for feedback. Afterward, they record a verbal passage and submit it to the community for feedback. With modules covering four different learning levels (beginner, intermediate, proficient, and advanced), “spending 160 hours can take the user from the basics to a level of passable everyday conversation” (“Smell the Coffee,” 2009, para. 5). Each level is subdivided into “units” and even further into “lessons” that generally follow a defined path.

If users wish, they may also pay to have their written and verbal exercises evaluated by professionals working for *Livemocha*, rather than by the overall *Livemocha*
In addition to completing the path outlined above, users can complete a variety of optional exercises, including magnet exercises in which they view a word of sentence in their native language and then drag and drop the equivalent phrase in the target language into a box (Figure 4.2). They may also take quizzes that test their

Figure 4.2. A magnet exercise in which users “drag and drop” a translation into a box. [Screen capture]. Retrieved October 13, 2009, from Livemocha.
knowledge on the vocabulary just practiced. While Livemocha offers a wealth of highly structured language activities that include pre-programmed feedback, many of the exercises are also created by users themselves. For instance, each user has the ability to create a “flashcard set” that includes related vocabulary words (Figure 4.3). As other users use the flashcard sets, they rate the helpfulness of the cards. The highest rated flashcard sets then appear as suggestions for other users. In this way, many of the language activities on Livemocha become socially constructed, with the users—not the moderators—determining what qualifies as appropriate content and what does not. User-
created content that is not utilized is not highly ranked, and thus the user’s contributions go unnoticed.

In addition to providing feedback in a ranking system, *Livemocha* community members can submit feedback through text or audio comments with a microphone and/or webcam. As users complete lessons and provide feedback on others’ work, they accrue “Mochapoints” that indicate how many language activities they have completed, along with a “Teacher Score” that demonstrates the extent that they have provided feedback for others. Additionally, a “leaderboard” with the names of the five top ranking members
taking the course keeps the involved learner on his (or her) toes” (“Smell the Coffee,” 2009, para. 9). As seen in Figure 4.4, users can also view the details of their Mochapoints to see what types of exercises they have participated in most. While Mochapoints do not provide tangible rewards, they serve as incentive for completing further activities and are similar to achieving higher levels as one might in a videogame such as World of Warcraft.

**Examining Livemocha**

*Livemocha*, like most virtual platforms, is a response to a particular exigence, or an imperfection that requires some form of positive modification. According to Lloyd Bitzer (1968), a rhetorical situation is the context in which a particular audience is capable of providing a “fitting response” to an exigence. In the case of *Livemocha*, each individual user is both an author and an audience member who brings to the site an individual set of constraints along with the potential for offering a fitting response. The overriding exigence of the platform is the need for users to learn a new language, but each user brings with him or herself a unique set of concerns—for example, the inability to interact with others who speak the target language in person due to lack of time, physical location, or possibly anxiety when speaking the language.

To address their individual constraints to learning a foreign language, as well as to provide a fitting response for other users, *Livemocha* contributors have a unique opportunity. Within the environment, they are free to complete language exercises at their own pace and to do the same when providing feedback for others. However, there is one
constant: users are expected to help others acquire their native language just as much as they receive help on their work. This back-and-forth method is the central tenet of tandem learning and seems to lead to more intrinsic motivation among participants; if a native German speaker wants to master French, for example, she better be prepared to provide feedback for those learning German. Thus, the pace at which a learner moves forward on Livemocha is determined in large part by the manner and pace with which she or he teaches. However, it is important to note that issues may arise in Livemocha, as in any tandem learning scenario, when language partners’ skills in the target language are not balanced.

If language is truly symbolic as Kenneth Burke (1968) posits, then it makes sense to learn language in an environment that emphasizes language as action. In Livemocha, learning language becomes an active process; no longer can a student sit back and expect a foreign language to be drilled into his or her head. Rather, the learner must actively seek which activities he or she most wants to complete and then make an effort to complete them at his or her own pace. What drives learners to continue in the environment depends on their individual goals, whether that be simply to meet new people or to further develop skills in a target language. When students are responsible for creating content for others, they tend to engage more with that content and to truly learn it. When creating a flashcard set, for example, a user must consider whether or not the flashcards will be useful for others. When designing my own set, for instance, I checked it more vigorously than I would have had it just been for myself. I continuously asked, “Did I spell all the words correctly? Are the words closely enough related? Who will be
using these cards? Will they judge me if I haven’t written them correctly?” The desire to become an accepted “teacher” or contributor to Livemocha guided the effort I was willing to devote to the teaching process, which, in turn, affected how much I learned from the cards themselves.

Along the same lines, when completing language activities, I edited my writing assignments more heavily than I would have had they been for my eyes only, or if they would only be “graded” by a pre-programmed machine or software package. The desire to be a successful part of the community propelled me to improve my writing in Spanish as much as possible. Similarly, as I commented on non-native English speakers’ exercises in English, I often strived to write my comments to them in Spanish. I knew that doing so would be more helpful for users who would not necessarily understand the complexity of my comments in their target language while also forcing me to communicate effectively in my own target language. Completing exercises that would be directly evaluated by members of my language learning community, even if the members were people whom I had never met face-to-face, encouraged me to consider exactly how my language skills were useful with real-life interaction with others.

This indirect pressure to improve one’s language in the environment to communicate with others, both on Livemocha and elsewhere, was not unique to me. Other users, such as David Vega, a 22-year-old Argentine, uses the Livemocha chat feature to learn more colloquial English so he can communicate effectively with his English-speaking relatives who live in the United States. In this way, his language learning in the environment is not entirely prescriptive. In fact, he admits that he has yet
to complete many of the pre-designed language activities on the site that teach “standard” Spanish grammar. Instead, he prefers chatting with others because it allows him to better clarify the meaning of certain English phrases. In one humorous exchange between him and me, for example, he asked me to clarify a colloquial phrase he had heard from native English speakers:

awilker: insane in the membrane
david vega: i’m sorry what does that phrase means ?
awilker: it’s a funny way of saying someone or something is crazy
awilker: insane = crazy
awilker: membrane = part of the brain
awilker: and it rhymes
awilker: make sense?
david vega: hahaha
david vega: yeah
david vega: i’ll you that phrase
awilker: use?
awilker: use it in moderation...hehe

After we developed a rapport of helping each other with our foreign language foibles, Vega seemed to become more comfortable asking me to define or clarify words or phrases he either did not fully understand, as seen in the exchange below:

david vega: and was does hommie or homeboy means ?
awilker: homie
awilker: homie is short for homeboy
david vega: yes
awilker: let me think of how to explain it haha
awilker: do you know what “dawg” means?
awilker: or “bff”?  
david vega: yes i think i know waht dawg

david vega: means
david vega: it’a like dog
david vega: but like street way ?
awilker: what do you mean by street way?
awilker: a homie is like a guy’s friend
awilker: but it’s very informal
awilker: a homeboy is like a guy friend who you’re very close with
david vega: there you go
david vega: i see

The chat exchanges between Vega and I fall under Merriam-Webster’s (2010) definition of chat, which means “to talk in an informal or familiar manner” or “to talk lightly, glibly, or flirtatiously with.” As seen in our exchanges with terms like “haha” or “hehe,” we both enjoyed the conversations, whether in Spanish or English, because we were often telling jokes and exchanging humorous stories about where we live. Our interactions demonstrate that learning a foreign language can and does involve play, an idea that is too often missing from traditional language learning practices. Learning a new language should be fun and should emphasize the imperfect nature of language acquisition. Fortunately, the chat exchanges between Vega and I were typical of many that I conducted on the site. Almost every time I “friended” someone on Livemocha, he or she would inevitably accept my friend request and send me a chat invitation when we were both online. In chat, many users preferred to type almost entirely in English, as doing so helped them improve their writing skills in their target language. Another user named Leo, a 32-year-old man from Argentina, preferred chatting in English because he is studying to become an English teacher and hopes to live in an English-speaking country someday:

Leo: yes i´m trying to be an English teacher . It´s really hard , I must tell you
awilker: I imagine so. Have you been using Livemocha for long?
Leo: not really, I´m quite new here. it´s the first time I have the opportunity to chat with people from all over the world. I and love it!
Leo: please correct any mistakes I make please
awilker: sure, no problem

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Leo: can you use as many idioms and phasal verbs as posible please? it´s hard for me to pick them up

Like Vega, Leo prefers to learn English through the chat feature of the site because he wishes to gain language skills he can apply when he encounters English speakers in person. In other words, his goal is to transfer his language skills into a “real” world context, to extend his newly gained knowledge beyond the platform he is acquiring it in. Although Leo prefers chatting in English, our conversations inevitably became a mixture of both Spanish and English, and that is when tandem learning truly took place. As I taught him phrases in English, he taught me just as many in Spanish:

awilker: como se dice “just kidding” en espanol? [how do you say “just kidding” in spanish?]
Leo: just kidding es “estaba bromeando” o “era broma” [just kidding is “estaba bromeando” or “era broma”]

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Leo: cuenta conmigo
awilker: que significa tiene? [what does that mean?]
awilker: “cuenta”?  
Leo: que significado tiene? esa frase significa que haré lo que prometí [what does it mean? this phrase means that I will do what I promised]

Additionally, we informally taught each other several of the cultural and linguistic differences between English and Spanish in different locations, as demonstrated in the example below:
awilker: cuantos anos tienes? [how old are you?]
awilker: is it rude to address you as tu by the way?
awilker: vos?
Leo: acá en argentina usamos vos para hablar [here in argentina we use vos to speak]
Leo: pero cuando hablas con alguien mayor o una autoridad debes usar “usted” [but when you speak with someone older or an authority figure you should use “usted”]

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awilker: keep in mind the phrases differ state by state and between britain and the us

Similarly, native Portuguese speaker “jairo” and I had the following email exchange about teaching one another a target language:

Jairo: ok,amiga,no hay problema,se quieras desenvolver la conversación en español,puedo ayudarte y así podrás ayudarme con mi inglés,vale!un gran abrazo!God bless you so much!!! [ok, friend, no problem if you would like to have the conversation in Spanish, I can help you and you can help me with my English. a big hug! God bless you so much !!!]

While many users like Vega, Leo, and jairo prefer to chat in English to practice their target language, they are just as willing to type in Spanish to assist my language learning. Still, others type almost entirely in Spanish because their English is not at a level where they feel comfortable chatting in the language. Alan Martins, for example, chatted with me almost entirely in English and would generally ask for clarification in Spanish if I asked a question in English:

awilker: bueno...have you left comments for other users on assignments?
Alan Martins: tipo que? [what do you mean?]
Alan Martins: por ejemplo [for example]
awilker: have you provided feedback for other users on livemocha? entiendes? [do you understand?]
Alan Martins: hay como hablar eso en español? [Is there a way to say this in Spanish?]
awilker: no se...un momento [i don’t know…one moment]
awilker: ¿Jamás proporcionas reacción para otros usuarios en el livemocha? [Have you ever left comments for other users on livemocha?]

The fast rate at which users were willing to communicate with me in English is not surprising considering that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been shown to improve students’ willingness-to-communicate in a foreign language (Arnold, 2007; Yashima, 2002). In a general sense, Overbaugh and Lin (2006) also found that CMC can lead to lower anxiety and increased participation among students who feel uncomfortable participating in traditional, face-to-face classroom settings. Many researchers (e.g., Smith, 2003) have also discovered that synchronous CMC technology such as instant messaging improves oral communicative abilities. One example that seems to support this assertion is another exchange with Martins:

awilker: dices que prefieres el chat, verdad? por que? [you say that you enjoy the chat feature, right? why?]
Alan Martins: es mas interesante conocer personas nuevas, de diferentes idimomas, me gusta eso [it’s more interesting to meet new people who speak different languages this way, I like that]
awilker: yo también [me too]
awilker: es mas personal, no? [it’s more personal, right?]
Alan Martins: si es mas personal que las clasese normales [yes, it’s more personal than normal classes]
Arguably, the informal nature of the chat feature reduces anxiety associated with communicating with native speakers, which may increase production in the target language. Based on Sean Williams and Deborah Switzer’s (2010) discovery that trust in virtual teams develops much more quickly than in face-to-face teams—a concept known as “swift trust”—it is reasonable to expect that trust via chatroom dialogue would develop more quickly than in a face-to-face tandem interaction. Without the physical pressure of producing perfect language, a user in Livemocha is likely to relax more, thereby communicating more and having fun learning the new language. As revealed by Denise Reid (2004), playfulness in virtual reality interactions is closely related to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) concept of flow.

Reid (2004) defines playfulness as the ability to “feel presence with the activity” at hand (p. 451). More specifically, she defines computer playfulness as “an individual’s tendency to interact spontaneously, inventively, and imaginatively with computers” (p. 451). Computer interactions, she posits, are “influenced by the situation” (p. 452). Furthermore, playfulness is comprised of four basic elements: Intrinsic motivation, internal control, freedom to suspend reality, and framing.

Intrinsic motivation refers to “some aspect of the activity itself, rather than to an external reward, that provides impetus for the individual’s involvement in the activity” (p. 452). In the case of many Livemocha users, an internal desire to truly learn how to communicate with other people in their target language drives their activity on the websites. In the case of Vega and Leo, for example, not only does the desire to make “friends” on the site drive them to partake in dialogue with other users, but also the desire
to communicate with English speakers outside of the site. In my case, the ability to speak with native Spanish speakers inspired me to complete as many language activities as possible, in addition to communicating with users in “real time” via the chat feature. That is not to say that Livemocha does not foster extrinsic motivation, however. It is entirely possible that a user would complete language activities on the site simply to meet a course requirement or to simply gain “Mochapoints” for bragging rights. But the primary goal of most users appears to be to gain a true understanding of a new language (or languages) and to do so in an environment where they can interact with real people both synchronously and asynchronously.

Closely tied to intrinsic motivation is internal control, which “suggests that the individual is largely in charge of his or her actions and at least some aspects of the activity’s outcome” (Reid, 2004, p. 452). For Livemocha users, internal control is certainly present. While the user cannot necessarily create any activity he or she wants, he or she can choose at will which optional activities to complete, whom to friend, whom to send his or her written and verbal exercises to for evaluation, which language(s) to learn, and so on. The ability to influence one’s learning process in the platform, as well as to choose which activities to complete in relation to one’s skill level, contributes to flow. Users are under no obligation to complete activities they do not find enjoyable or meaningful, so they complete them either because they are “fun” or because their desire to learn the language is so intense that it motivates them to continue.

The third element of playfulness mentioned by Reid is the freedom to suspend reality, which “means that the individual chooses how close to objective reality the
transaction will be” (p. 452). In other words, the ability to “make believe” or “pretend” in a virtual environment contributes to the level of playfulness a user will experience. While most users on Livemocha use their legal names on the site and identify their true location, the ability to “pretend” to be someone else still exists. For example, users are free to represent themselves through any avatar of their choosing within reason (Figure 4.5) or to embellish certain parts of their personality through chat with other users and/or on their profiles.

Lastly, the fourth construct of playfulness—framing—“refers to the ability to give cues and respond to cues” (Bateson, 1971, as cited in Reid, p. 452). This tenet is most evident on Livemocha when users leave comments for other users and leave their own. One user, for instance, left me the following comment on a verbal exercise in which I practiced my Spanish pronunciation (see Figure 4.6). Translated roughly, the comment in Figure 4.7 becomes “Your pronunciation is good. However, you need to improve the R. In Spanish it’s not so pronounced. It’s smoother, more natural. I hope my comment has
helped you. If you have any concerns, write me.” On a similar exercise, another user left the comment in Figure 4.7, which when translated, roughly becomes “Very good. Just check the pronunciation of the ‘rr’ and the accents, because at times you change them. I left you a recording. I hope it helps.”

When evaluating the responses to my own writing, I have the option to either accept or reject cues to improve my pronunciation, or indeed, any aspect of my written or verbal Spanish abilities. Once again, the control is in my hands. However, the social pressure to “succeed” at Spanish—to prove my competence in the language to native speakers—motivates me, as it does other users, to continue onward in the environment.

If we accept Reid’s (2004) four aspects of playfulness, then we can easily stipulate that for many users, playfulness can occur in Livemocha. Closely related to
playfulness is the concept of flow. When learners have fun in an environment while consistently improving their skills at a similar rate as the difficulty level of the tasks, they achieve flow. Since users in *Livemocha* complete activities based on their personal skill set (beginner, intermediate, proficient, and advanced), they possess the ability to complete exercises that align with their current language skills, achieving a balance between boredom and arousal and a sense of worry and control (see Figure 2.1). In this way, they can in many instances achieve “flow.”

As a *Livemocha* user, I frequently became “in the zone” when completing pre-designed language courses. Because I began with exercises that matched my initial skill set in Spanish, most tasks were not frustrating. My main concern was completing more tasks so that I could contribute to the community and finish a particular course; I wanted other users to find my contributions valuable, and I wanted to teach others English, even if they were not rating my Spanish language exercises. By concentrating mostly on how others in the community would perceive me, I inadvertently took my attention away from the actual language learning process while still acquiring new language skills. A key feature of *Livemocha* that allowed me to progress in my Spanish progress at a consistent rate was the scaffolding received from native Spanish-speaking users. Scaffolding, as defined by Lev Vygotsky (1978), is when a more experienced person teaches someone else higher level skills. According to Vygotsky, each learner has a zone of proximal development (ZPD), a “range of tasks that one cannot yet perform independently, but can accomplish with the help of a more competent individual” (as cited in Maccarelli, 2006, para. 2). In order to provide feedback on users’ completed exercises, a “teacher” does not
necessarily have to be fluent in the target language. If her or his language skills in the new language are superior to the learner’s, then he or she is free to leave feedback. For instance, an intermediate German learner can provide feedback for a beginner, and a native Italian speaker might rate an advanced Italian speaker’s work. Interesting to note, however, is that users do not just help those who speak and write their target language(s) but almost anyone who wants to learn the user’s native language.

For example, in my own experience, I befriended an Italian speaker learning English. Although he could not comment on my progress in Spanish, evaluating his English language exercises was immensely fulfilling for me. I knew that by offering him assistance, not only would I be accruing additional “Teacher” points, but I also would increase the likelihood that native Spanish speakers—whether or not they were attempting to learn English—would comment on my exercises in Spanish. This feeling of community and desire to help others acquire a new language extends beyond the Livemocha interface into its other social networks, including Facebook.

**Gaming Theory**

In addition to analyzing Livemocha in terms of playfulness and flow, it is possible to examine it under the lens of gaming theory. While the platform is not designed as an MMORPG in the traditional sense, it does contain several “game” like elements that enhance its capacity for teaching students a foreign language and for engaging certain types of learners. In terms of Richard Bartle’s (1996) four player archetypes, Livemocha’s achievers are those users whose primary goal is to attain
Mochapoints and Teacher points. They complete and evaluate as many language exercises as possible, all in an effort to get ahead. Explorers, on the other hand, enjoy perusing the website. They take interest in finding new features of the site that they may have never noticed before. They may take different language courses simply because they can. Several users, for instance, are currently enrolled in over five language courses—not necessarily because they have a need for all five, but because they want to partake in any part of the language community as possible.

Socializers are those users who, for the most part, avoid the pre-created language activities. They forego flashcards and magnet exercises for direct interaction with other
users through video, text, and microphone chat. These are users like Vega and Leo who have been on the site for months yet have only completed one or two exercises. For these learners, language learning centers around direct interaction with people—in other words, communication—rather than on language exercises. Lastly, while killers may not be as popular on Livemocha as in World of Warcraft, for example, they can certainly exist. They are users who prefer to “dominate” other users by spamming their exercises with comments or leaving nasty comments on others’ work. For these users, the goal in using Livemocha is to assert “dominance” over a foreign language by accruing as many “points” as possible and by overpowering other users who possess lower level skills in the target language. This user depicted in Figure 4.8, for example, leaves an identical comment for almost every user who completes a Spanish language activity. In doing so, the user receives a wealth of “Mochapoints” without having to create individual comments for each user.

As demonstrated through the player archetypes, like Second Life, Livemocha, provides an opportunity for a variety of learners to acquire new language skills by creating a social community. Unlike Second Life, however, Livemocha focuses predominantly on language acquisition and is built specifically on foreign language principles such as tandem learning. Within the environment, learners can pick and choose which activities to participate in, thereby truly personalizing their learning experience. Although many will prefer the informal nature of the chat feature over the language activities, or even a combination of both, Livemocha seems to offer something for a variety of personality types.
CHAPTER 5: 
LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH WORLD OF WARCRAFT

According to Todd Bryant (2006), a language program administrator at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Penn., “much of the current research in second language acquisition (SLA) stresses the social aspect of language acquisition” (para. 1). When studying a new language, learners need to communicate with others in that target language and to engage in meaningful tasks that allow them to see the relevance of their newly acquired skills. Typically language learning is enhanced when students recognize that the benefits of their efforts extend beyond a specific moment. In other words, they usually become more motivated to participate in language learning tasks when they recognize such activities will help them long term. As Bryant says, in the foreign language environment students “benefit from a framework that offers a wide variety of solutions to a given ‘real life’ situation” (para. 1). He goes on to say that “many of these goals can be achieved using simulations or gaming,” including multi-player online-role playing games, or MMORPGs, such as World of Warcraft (para. 2).

What is World of Warcraft?

As an international game, World of Warcraft is played around the globe in a variety of different languages. As of 2008, World of Warcraft was the most popular MMORPG in the world with over 10 million registered users (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008). Although the game is not originally intended for foreign language acquisition, its international aspect and social functions provide a rich opportunity to explore foreign
language acquisition within the environment. Within the game, players often work together in “guilds” to complete common tasks or “quests” that allow them to advance. “In order to complete these tasks,” says Bryant (2006), “the player is required to speak to characters controlled by the software, read texts, and speak and collaborate with other players through text chatting and messengers” (para. 5). While completing tasks, players can “practice language skills within a system designed to provide feedback and demonstrate progress” (Bryant, para. 6). For example, World of Warcraft offers achievements to players as they make it to level 10, complete 100 quests, and so on. Along with completing quests, these achievements give players “experience points” that allow them to move up levels, all the way from 1 to 80 at the time of this writing. Similar to the Mochapoints in Livemocha, these advancements serve as incentive for players. Even though achievements in World of Warcraft are not necessarily tied to attaining a foreign language, players may pick up on target language skills as a side effect of communicating with other users and attempting to obtain achievements.

As with most MMORPGs, the primary goal of World of Warcraft is not “winning” per se but rather to progress in the game. The game is perpetual or persistent, meaning users can come and go as they please, because the gaming environment remains the same regardless of that player’s presence or absence. Therefore, a player using the platform for foreign language acquisition is not necessarily tied down to that environment; he or she can advance at his or her own pace and choose when and where to interact with other players. And because the game is not founded on any pedagogical principles, players may not realize that they are, in fact, learning anything other than how to advance in the game.
In Bryant’s (2006) study, for example, he completed quests in German with a student learning the language. Although he did not provide formal grammar instruction in *World of Warcraft* in the traditional sense, he and the student communicated in German together via text chat as they discussed where they should hunt, what their progress was, how best to hunt, etc. as they gathered 10 feathers and meat for a quest (para. 14). In the environment, he encouraged his student to type in complete sentences and to use modal verbs reviewed prior to entering *World of Warcraft*. However, as he points out, because the student became focused on completing the task in *World of Warcraft*, rather than simply practicing the verb forms, she used other verb forms to express what she meant to say (para. 14). In this way, her learning in German extended beyond the minimum requirement; successfully communicating to complete a task with her instructor motivated her to engage with the language further.

Although Bryant (2006) points out that instruction outside of *World of Warcraft* is necessary to supplement the instruction in *World of Warcraft*, his example supports the idea that foreign language learning needs to be goal-oriented and applied to a task other than the simple kill-and-drill method of verb forms and vocabulary. It also supports Gunther Kress’s (1999) notion that we can no longer simply rely on traditional methods of learning, burying our heads in the sand as we ignore the potential of new forms of communication. As Kress says, “Our present theories of semiosis are theories founded on convention and on use. Consequently, creativity is regarded as unusual, as rare and therefore most prized” (p. 67). As an alternative to relying on traditional modes of learning simply because they have always been in place, he argues for a new theory
“founded on innovation, on constant transformation and change, brought about by individuals”—a theory in which “creativity is usual, and conventionality, in its strong form of ‘doing things as they have always been done,’ will be unusual” (p. 67).

While Kress (1999) focuses on English instruction in particular, his assertions also apply to foreign language pedagogy. As he says, “A curriculum based on theories of semiosis of convention and use cannot hope to produce human dispositions deeply at ease with change, difference, and constantly transformative action” (p. 67). If we wish to provide engaging content for students that will allow them to use their newly acquired language skills to communicate with others in a diverse world, we must provide tasks that allow them to do so. Additionally, we should recognize that literacy has always been multi-semiotic—that is, it has always been created with visual and textual elements. Therefore, trying to teach literacy, whether in English or another language, using text alone is fruitless. MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft may provide an avenue for capitalizing on students’ newfound electracy (see Ulmer, 2003) while simulating the multifaceted, constantly evolving nature of language learning.

One player who chose to take advantage of learning languages in a nonconventional way is Dan Roy (2007) who played World of Warcraft on a Spanish language server specifically to pick up more of the language. Upon entering the game, he had intermediate Spanish ability. In his words, “I can understand just about everything in the game if I read slowly and keep a computerized dictionary handy” (para. 4). However, the game itself has taught him several additional words which continuously appear in the game and which he learns easily—for example, key words that “relate to [his] character’s
primary actions, like resting, hitting, taking damage, and casting spells” (para. 5). In addition, each quest contains grammatically correct descriptions of the tasks to be completed, which serve as a means to practice his reading comprehension in the target language, as long as he chooses to read them. It is, after all, possible to complete quests without ever reading the quest descriptions or without reading them completely. Lastly, Roy says that “chatting with other players through text or reading their text transcripts in real-time exposes me to natural, imperfect language production (natural in the context of the game, at least)” (para. 4). He says this last feature is “perhaps the most compelling
way to become comfortable with the language” although he admits he has not spent much time doing this thus far (para. 7).

Roy (2007) also acknowledges that playing World of Warcraft in Spanish is easier than it would be if he did not enter the environment with prior Spanish knowledge. He has a friend learning German, for example, who has struggled to play in a German-speaking realm “since German and English vocabularies differ more” and another friend who “generally forgoes reading the quest text entirely” because she “struggles with the vocabulary and different grammatical forms” (para. 6). These difficulties remind us that one environment will not work for everyone in the same manner and that additional instruction with other programs and activities might be necessary to acquire the target language.

Like Bryant (2006), Roy (2007) says that World of Warcraft best serves as a “complement to other learning activities,” namely because players spend a significant amount of time in the game doing things other than learning the language and because most players do not engage in audio chat with much frequency (para. 8, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that “the game does encourage a long-term commitment to language learning” and that “for some, slow and steady may be better than nothing at all. Players who enjoy the game and language will find play an easy, fun and rewarding way to learn” (para. 8). For those who cannot, or simply choose not, to study languages in a highly structured environment, World of Warcraft may provide an opportunity to learn the target language in an indirect fashion or serve as a supplement or complement to other forms of instruction.
For instance Bryant (2008), who used *World of Warcraft* for supplemental German instruction, says the following:

> I don’t think you can teach German entirely in World of Warcraft. But as an additional hour in the evening, whenever [students] would otherwise be watching a film or TV in German, I think it’s certainly better than those kinds of activities, because they have to produce language as well as just receive it; they need to speak and they need to write and if they don’t understand something, that affects their gameplay. So they really need to concentrate on the language they are exposed to. (as cited in Matzat, para. 8)

The necessity to be understood to accomplish a goal in the game relates to the need to type in the appropriate language in a foreign language MOO. If a student does not find the appropriate means for communicating in the target language, he or she will fail to complete the required task, whether that is to kill an evil dwarf or to type only in the target language for thirty minutes. Both Roy and Bryant’s (2006) points also reflect the attitude that language learning does not occur in a vacuum; the intent with exploring virtual environments for foreign language learning is not to suggest that a learner can (or should) learn a language entirely in one environment, but to offer opportunities for learners to pick and choose what works for themselves. For instance, a foreign language instructor might give students the option of either participating in *World of Warcraft* out of class or communicating with native speakers via *Livemocha* or *Second Life.*
In my own experience, I found that learning Spanish in *World of Warcraft* was most effective at teaching me informal language abilities, such as asking “Do you know where the weaponry merchant is?” or “How are you?” or “How do I leave Undercity?” While I will likely never ask for whereabouts of a weaponry merchant in a face-to-face interaction, in a Spanish-speaking country I will likely run into situations when I need to ask for the location of a museum, restaurant, bathroom, pharmacy, etc. Knowing the correct way to form the question “Do you know where X is?” (as in “¿Usted sabe dónde está X?”) will be helpful no matter where I am trying to go. *World of Warcraft* gave me an opportunity to practice these verbal forms without the “real life” consequences of getting lost in person. However, the social pressure of the game motivated me to prepare my Spanish language messages well prior to sending them to other players, forcing me to practice the language and giving me feedback on how others would react to my language skills. Wanting to avoid the classification of a “newbie” or a “non-native speaker,” I often used a Spanish-English dictionary to look up words prior to composing a message. To desire to “fit in” to the *World of Warcraft* discourse community motivated me to acquire the necessary vocabulary to participate, much as the desire to be a part of a new language community might motivate someone to learn a language in a face-to-face scenario.

Although *World of Warcraft* was helpful in providing informal language learning, it did not provide clear instruction of grammatical forms and vocabulary that I and many other students may need to begin communicating in a new language. It is, therefore, not ideal or feasible to rely on the game to provide all of one’s language instruction. Nevertheless, it can and does serve as an avenue for extending language learning from
other environments. The sentiment is echoed by Alan Martins, the native Spanish-speaking *Livemocha* user who prefers to type almost entirely in Spanish. During the course of our *Livemocha* conversations, he indicated that he also used to play *World of Warcraft* in an English-speaking realm. Initially he chose an English-speaking realm simply because he believed he would encounter more players there with whom to complete quests. However, he soon noticed an unexpected benefit: learning common English words found in the game, such as “tree,” “hill,” “building,” and “city.” Although he believes much of the vocabulary has helped him outside of the game, he says he prefers more structure when learning English. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that language learning is a positive side effect to interacting in *World of Warcraft*. His comments once again remind us that all learner preferences are different, that not every environment is ideal for everyone, and that learning languages is multifaceted.

In a platform like *World of Warcraft*, learning becomes more student-centered because the teacher has little control over the environment itself and his or her students’ interactions within it. While this idea may frighten many teachers, it can be beneficial in representing the chaotic nature of communication in “real life.” Bryant (2008) supports this point when he says that the main difference between conventional language learning and learning in *World of Warcraft* “is that everything is kind of dictated by the students’ actions” (para. 7). Because of the fast-paced nature of the game, communication generally needs to be swift, or the player(s) run the risk of being attacked by an evil creature. Although most people will likely never be attacked by a warlock or evil spirit in person, the impetus to communicate quickly in the language often exists—when someone
needs to tell a taxi driver where to go next, for example, to order bus tickets, or to explain to a pharmacist what type of illness plagues them. In this way, *World of Warcraft* may simulate the necessity to communicate in the target language efficiently and effectively. If a student does not know how to say “I need an apple” in a software program like Rosetta Stone, on the other hand, the consequences are relatively slim.

By creating consequences for actions, *World of Warcraft* in essence creates what Burke (1968) terms a “rhetorical situation” in which the exigence is to use the target language to reach a goal as efficiently as possible. In the environment, generally there is no time for stalling during quests unless one wants his or her character to die. Particularly in group quests, the need to communicate quickly and clearly can literally mean the difference between life and death. Therefore, it is the players’ responsibility to provide a “fitting response” to the situation to ensure that they and their group members do not die and to do so using their newfound language abilities. As with any rhetorical situation, constraints exist. In *World of Warcraft*, in particular, they involve players’ language abilities, awareness of the rules of the game, characters’ talents, and so on. To overcome these constraints, players must work both with one another and the environment itself to complete quests. With the added pressure of communicating in a target language, they must strive to use the language skills they have acquired while accomplishing a goal not directly related to the language at hand.
Communication

The numerous communication channels available in *World of Warcraft* provide a way for learners to engage with other players in their target language while choosing which discourses they would like to participate in. In this way, the game provides a social dimension not evident in solitary learning programs such as Rosetta Stone or distance education courses where students complete the bulk of their work individually. While these channels overlap and players can participate in several channels at once, generally they provide a means for players to customize their communication in the game, from the...
macro to the micro (see Figure 5.2). Because players choose which forms of discourse they would like to participate in and with whom, they are able to form concentric discourses that help them best reach their goals. In many ways, the communication channels in the game mirror the “real life” discourse communities or social layers one encounters when learning a foreign language. For instance, in person as in the game,
learners typically have a tight-knit group of people whom they seek out for help in addition to larger groups they become a part of as they gain more experience and acquire the terminology necessary for that particular discourse community. In many instances, they can also choose to leave a particular group if it no longer meets their needs.

As seen in Figure 5.3, players can communicate across channels simultaneously, picking and choosing which they would like to join or leave. Channels are color-coded, and players type in the channel through commands such as “/trade” or “/g” or “/guild.” The largest, or outer, communication channel in World of Warcraft is the trade channel (Figure 5.2). Communication in this channel is “heard” or visible by all players in the game while they are in cities, unless they deliberately choose to leave the channel. This channel serves as a forum for players to trade items within the game, to discuss quests, and to engage in general conversation related to the game. However, the unspoken rule of this channel is that a player must know the appropriate game terminology prior to sending messages. Otherwise, he or she will be classified as a “noob” or “newbie” and in many instances will not receive the desired help.

A relative newcomer, for example, might be led on a wild goose chase after requesting quest help on the trade channel from more experienced players. Thus, this channel becomes what Foucault (1972) terms a “discursive formation” in which certain forms of discourse are considered acceptable for inclusion and others are not. This channel could be compared to the overall language community a language learner is trying to join—for instance, the Spanish language discourse community. In person, a newcomer to a language is less likely to consult a complete stranger from the larger
community for assistance than someone whom they have communicated with previously. They are also not likely to participate in the larger community freely because they realize they do not yet possess the skills and appropriate knowledge to do so. However, if they choose to participate anyway, they may be mocked or ignored.

Secondly, the guild channel (see Figure 5.4) is comprised of many players who choose to play on the same realm and interact with one another. Although players may not necessarily know or communicate with everyone in their guild, there is generally a sense of camaraderie in the guild channel not evident in the trade channel. Only players in a particular guild can see the interactions that take place by other guild members, meaning the discourse is less widespread. Also a player can only join a guild with permission. As a result, the social network of the guild channel becomes smaller and in many cases more personal. Because of this, players are more likely to seek help from others in the guild when in a bind and to receive genuine assistance with problems. In a foreign language realm, participating in a guild might be helpful for asking questions related to the target language, quests, items, weapons, etc. without the fear of receiving
dishonest feedback. This channel is similar to a language department at a university, where many people may not know one another personally but share a commonality that binds them together and makes them more likely to call on one another for help with problems.

Even smaller than guild channels are raid channels, which are typically used when players wish to complete highly complex quests with one another that require more than five people. To form a raid, a player invites people to a group and can assign other group members the ability to further invite others. Once all raid members have been invited, they can hold several roles such as “Main Tank,” “Backup Tank,” “Healer,” and “Burst Damage,” among others. Each role has particular responsibilities that can only be held by members of particular classes. For example, only Warriors and Druids can take on the role of “Main Tank,” meaning they are responsible for gathering, maintaining, and
surviving damage incurred throughout the raid. A “Healer,” on the other hand, is responsible for keeping all players alive during the raid.

Within the raid channel, communication is particularly important because one misstep of one player could potentially result in the downfall of all players. Thus, planning ahead through the channel and maintaining appropriate contact throughout is highly important. In terms of foreign language learning in person, this channel could be likened to a classroom, a work environment, or a sports team in which each student, worker, or teammate acts as an individual while still working toward a common goal using the same language. Within these environments, typically everyone knows one another more intimately than in a guild channel because they rely on one another more.

In situations when players cannot complete tasks alone but do not need the help of an entire raid, they can join a group of up to five players and converse in a group channel. Much as occurs in a raid, players rely on one another to defend against enemies and protect both their and their fellow group members’ lives. Similar to a group of friends in “real life,” group members in World of Warcraft care about the well-being of each other and work together to ensure each other’s safety. In my experience with World of Warcraft, I found groups of three or less to be extremely beneficial in helping me complete quests while practicing the target language. Because group size is relatively small but still allows the ability to interact with other players, it is in many ways ideal for practicing the foreign language in the environment. In situations in which creating a group was not feasible, I often called on guild members for more general help, as in, “Do you know where I can find a mount?” whereas communication with group members
tended to be more specific because the group members were typically right next to me in the environment. For example, I might ask a group member, “How many more warlocks do we need to kill before this quest is complete?” or “What will happen if I click on that treasure chest over there?”

Additionally, within the game, players choose from one of two factions, either the Horde or the Alliance. While in the game, players can talk to anyone in their faction, inviting them to a group, raid, or guild so they may complete quests together. However,
players from different factions cannot communicate openly with one another as the game imposes a language barrier between them. For instance, while a player from the Horde side may type to an Alliance player in Spanish, the game will “translate” the Spanish text into gibberish. Thus, to communicate with someone from an opposite faction, a user must rely on non-verbal cues, such as built-in emotions (waving, dancing, smiling, etc.) as seen in Figure 5.6. This interaction can be seen as a metaphor for the ways people who speak different languages communicate with one another using the few available means they have. It also reminds us that language learning does not simply involve written and verbal forms of communication, but also non-verbal cultural cues that accompany verbal elements to make them more meaningful for the intended parties.

Because learners choose which faction to join and which channels to participate in, World of Warcraft puts the responsibility of communicating in their hands, serving as a productive substitute to participating in language learning activities that do not provide direct interaction with real people. For example, while watching a foreign language film or completing language activities with software programs may help students learn the language, they ultimately fail to simulate interaction with real human beings. Unlike World of Warcraft, these activities also do not necessarily provide practice with the types of casual, conversational language of native speakers. This idea is supported by Edd Schneider and Kai Zheng, who hypothesized in 2007 that World of Warcraft would provide an excellent platform for teaching Chinese students English. At the 2007 Game Developers Conference, they presented “English Speaking Players as In-Game Content: New Ideas for Marketing to Youth in Asia” in which they explained their theory “that
online gaming can be used to teach English to Asian teens” (as cited in Ruberg, 2007, para. 2). Since in Chinese culture parents traditionally discourage game play but encourage English acquisition, they felt combining the two would be effective in bringing together students to engage in meaningful foreign language learning. According to Schneider, a professor at Suny Potsdam who teaches native English students,

All my students were getting up at three o’clock in the morning, putting on their headsets and chatting with these 12 year-olds in China. The Chinese kids were berserk about it. The teachers were saying it was their favorite class. It was really a win/win thing.

(as cited in Ruberg, para. 7).

Schneider goes on to say that many of the Chinese students unknowingly picked up on several English phrases while communicating in English:

Sometimes they didn’t even realize they were speaking English. They would say “M.T.”; it’s a Warcraft term. Or then there’s the fact that by the end you would hear the occasional “Oh shit!” Some of them were really starting to sound like Americans. A lot of time it was more a confidence thing than a language thing. Also, they’re getting conversational English they wouldn’t get in a normal class, more authentic English, with phrases they wouldn’t get in textbooks….This sort of social interaction
gives them a safe space to learn. (as cited in Ruberg, para. 8-9).

Customization

As with most MMORPGs, players in *World of Warcraft* choose a digital representation of themselves, also known as an avatar or a character. First players choose from one of two factions, or sides, of the game: the Alliance or the Horde. Once a player chooses a faction, he or she selects a character from one of five races assigned to that faction. For example, from the Alliance side, a player can choose either a Human, Dwarf, Gnome, Night Elf, or Draenei; for the Horde, he or she can choose an Orc, Troll, Tauren, Undead, or Blood Elf. Each race has its own unique abilities, so the player is able to choose what he or she would most like to do.

After deciding on a faction and a race, a player then chooses a class, some of which are only available to certain races. These include Druids, Hunters, Mages, Paladins, Priests, Rogues, Shaman, Warlocks, Warriors, and Death Knights. As with the different classes, each race comes with its own special abilities. Hunters, for example, can train pets that help them in combat with other players and enemies in the game while a Priest has the ability to “heal” others wounded in combat. Warriors, on the other hand, deal a lot of damage in combat. Players from different races often form guilds together that maximize their unique abilities. After choosing a character, one gives it a personalized name that typically corresponds with his or her offline and/or online persona in some way. I, for example, named my avatar Tandema in both an English-speaking
U.S. sever and in a Latin American server to reflect the tandem learning aspect of my research and my interest in foreign languages.

As a player continues in the game, he or she can purchase and/or acquire new items to bind to his or her character, further customizing it. For instance, my character in the Latin American realm, a blood elf hunter, wears a cape and two-handed axe purchased from a weaponry salesman in the game (Figure 5.8). As a hunter, she can train

Figure 5.7. Customizing an avatar in World of Warcraft. [Screen capture]. Retrieved March 13, 2010, from World of Warcraft.
Figure 5.8. My avatar, Tandema, with her pet dragonhawk, Daniello, in a Latin American realm. [Screen capture]. Retrieved February 22, 2010, from World of Warcraft.

a pet—in this case, a Dragonhawk—to assist her in combat with enemies. Although the range of customization in World of Warcraft is not as detailed as in Second Life, it provides an opportunity for players to individualize their avatars while also maintaining the appearance of their associated race and class. This, in turn, provides uniformity to the
game. A Tauren, for instance, can easily recognize a Priest who can help him or her heal during combat.

Once a player has chosen his or her faction, race, and class, he or she is ready to begin the game. Each race begins in a different location, meaning players will continuously undergo a unique experience even if they create new characters. Additionally, *World of Warcraft* hosts “World Events” throughout the year when players can complete special quests and acquire unique items. For instance, events like “Love is in the Air” (see Figure 5.9) occur around Valentine’s Day and “Brewfest” during October. More events are continuously added in addition to new quests and objects so that the environment is continuously evolving and players will have plenty to occupy their time even after they reach level 80. In this way, the environment simulates the “real world” in which surroundings constantly alter, and there are always new activities to explore. Because of the persistent nature of *World of Warcraft*, players can use it to practice their target language indefinitely. While language software programs can be reused, ultimately the user reaches the “end” of the program and must either upgrade to a higher level of the program or choose another one entirely to continue their language learning. In an everlasting game such as *World of Warcraft*, however, players can continue to interact both with the environment and other players.

In terms of flow theory, *World of Warcraft* offers an opportunity to match skills with enjoyment. When applied to foreign language learning, flow has been shown to occur when a steady stream of feedback is provided and goals are clear (Egbert, 2003). As players complete quests, acquire new items, and interact with others, they gain
experience points ("feedback") that eventually allow them to "level up" in the game. Goals are defined both by the game and the player, as they choose which quests to complete, which items to collect, and which level to aspire to. Although players may advance at a slower pace than others, either due to personal choice or playing ability, this does not necessarily affect their enjoyment of the game as long as they do not become bored or overly frustrated. For instance, I first advanced to level 22 of 80 on a U.S. server before switching to a Latin American server. On the first server, I spent almost twice as much time reaching level 22 as I did in the second server. However, I did not become
bored or overly frustrated in either realm because my skills were developing at a level with which I was comfortable.

One reason for this is that the game color codes quests according to the level of difficulty one will encounter, meaning players can pick and choose which ones to complete (Figure 5.3). Additionally, as Braxton Soderman (2009) of Brown University says, players can choose to play either on a Player-vs.-Player (PvP) realm, which poses more difficulty (see Figure 5.10), or a Player-vs.-Environment (PvE) realm, which tends to pose less difficulty. The former involves fighting and killing other characters created by people while the latter involves fighting and killing computer-generated characters built into the environment. As Soderman asserts, “WoW offers numerous game play features that allow individuals to find their own personalized flow zone, thus extending the appeal of the game to a wider audience” (para. 3). However, Soderman notes that several “tedious” tasks in World of Warcraft can hinder flow, such as collecting resources like gold or walking to quests. These activities “can take hundreds of hours of game play, play that increasingly strikes some gamers as work, especially those who have flowed through the process of leveling a character before” (para. 13). In my own experience, although I enjoyed the game and “leveling up,” my “flow” was often interrupted as I struggled to navigate the environment. Clearly flow is possible in World of Warcraft for many but not necessarily for everyone. Once again, different environments are more effective for some than others for foreign language learning.

In light of Richard Bartle’s (1996) four player archetypes, World of Warcraft is especially applicable. Killers are players who enjoy acting on other players. In the game,
they typically play on a PvP, or Player-vs. Player, realm because doing so allows them to inflict a large amount of damage. Achievers, on the other hand, tend to be more interested in acquiring “achievements” in the environment, attempting to gain the most experience points possible and reaching higher and higher levels. Explorers have ample opportunity to explore the terrain in the game and to find new, unusual objects, and are more likely to participate on PvE, or Player-vs.-Environment, realms in which players do not attack one another without consent. Lastly, socializers can communicate through the multiple social layers mentioned earlier from one-on-one communication all the way to participating in the trade channel.
It is important to note, however, that player types may overlap, and a player’s type may adjust over time. A killer, for example, might enjoy conversing with other players to develop strategies for killing other characters, while an explorer may enjoy the achievements that come along with discovering new terrain in the game. Using Bartle’s (1996) player archetypes, we can see that World of Warcraft provides engaging content for a variety of different learners and players, potentially making it a useful tool for a variety of language learning. For instance, an explorer or an achiever may pick up new Spanish vocabulary primarily by reading descriptions of new objects while an achiever may learn the language by reading quest descriptions. A socializer, on the other hand, may learn Spanish primarily through direct communication with other players.

Altogether, World of Warcraft provides an avenue for informal language learning as an indirect result of communicating and interacting within the environment. If we wish to make foreign language learning meaningful for students, we need to provide tasks that allow them to progress in the language while demonstrating the relevance to their actual lives. In doing so, we can hopefully produce environments and activities that will enhance their learning and move beyond the traditional modes of learning Kress (1999) mentions. Only once we have accomplished this can we move beyond “theories founded on convention and use” and move toward a more “creative” pedagogy that is not seen as “unusual” but as necessary to promote foreign language learning (p. 67). Additionally, we can move toward an investigation of online environments as their own virtual cultures in which language learning can take place.
According to Merriam-Webster, pedagogy is “the art, science, or profession of teaching” while learning is “knowledge or skill acquired by instruction or study.” Dictionary.com defines the terms similarly, as “the art or science of teaching; education; instructional methods” and “the act or process of acquiring knowledge or skill,” respectively. But what does it really mean to “teach,” and what does it really mean to “learn”? To answer these questions, we need to, as Ann Berthoff (1984) suggests, “problematize” learning (p. 753). We need to call into question previous views on teaching so that we can reach new avenues for promoting education, for abstracting learners’ ideas, and for moving beyond simplistic approaches that focus solely on short-term outcomes. Problematizing, Berthoff would argue, helps us expand the notion of learning beyond the “pedagogy of exhortation” to the “pedagogy of knowing” (p. 744), refocusing education from the aforementioned drill-and-kill method of instruction to a form focused on individual needs and adaptability to particular situations.

Through problematizing, we can invent a “pedagogy that views reading and writing as interpretation and making of meaning” (Berthoff, p. 743). Within the three virtual environments discussed in this thesis, learners make their own meaning based on their individual goals and their interactions with other users, residents, and players. In the process, they problematize their language learning, making it more personal for their needs and extending it beyond that particular environment into their material worlds. In these environments, learners begin to focus not only on the traditional “do this, do that”
mode of education but also on methods that allow them to make their own meaning within the target language through interactions with real people, in real time, with real life consequences.

The shift from the “pedagogy of exhortation” to the “pedagogy of knowing” described by Berthoff (1984) relates to Kenneth Burke’s (1968) differentiation of the scientistic and dramatistic views on language, which respectively focus on language as definition and language as symbolic action. The former supposes that language can be taken at face value whereas the latter emphasizes the interactive, ever-changing meanings inherent in all language. Because language is action-oriented, learning languages in environments that allow for multiple interpretations, interactions, and outcomes simply makes sense. As Berthoff posits, learners cannot make meaning until they are fully engaged and until they move away from what Paulo Freire (1988) terms the “banking model” of education. In other words, only once learners stop expecting knowledge to be “deposited” into their minds, and begin to search that knowledge for themselves, can they truly learn a language.

The virtual environments discussed in this thesis provide opportunities for both educators and learners to problematize learning—to abstract it, to grasp language skills and then apply them. These platforms thus allow us to move toward a new theory of language learning in virtual environments founded on both the context-specific goals in the particular platform and the abilities a learner can take from the platform and then apply to his or her physical world. This theory focuses on the rhetorical, discursive, and community-based nature of each environment and the types of learning each space lends
Figure 6.1. Gregory Ulmer’s representation of the shift from an oral to a literate and to an electrate tradition. [Original image].

itself to. It, therefore, relies heavily on the adaptive nature of each platform. Undergirding this new theory is Bitzer’s (1968) rhetorical situation, which presupposes that each environment contains an exigence, audience, and constraints. When determining which digital platform to use for language learning, one must first determine what his or her exigence is, if he or she is the type of audience for which the platform is intended, and what constraints may prevent him or her from succeeding in the environment, or consequently, succeeding in it.
This new theory for language learning in virtual environments, which I term “electrate language learning” (ELL), underlines the constantly shifting nature of language acquisition while emphasizing the ability to personalize one’s language learning in a digital space. It emphasizes that each platform provides different avenues for learning and that one digital tool does not necessarily provide all that one needs to learn a language; rather, each space offers unique opportunities for the making of personal meaning and for the ability to interact with other learners. This theory further posits that virtual environments extend language learning beyond what Ulmer (2003) characterizes as the oral tradition of “right versus wrong” and the literate tradition of “true versus false” into a new, electrate tradition that views learning in terms of “pain versus pleasure” (see Figure 6.1). This new literacy allows learners to engage in the creation of digital cultures and communities, navigating digital spaces based on their individual needs and the types of learning they find enjoyable.

The digital spaces discussed in the three previous chapters are virtual communities that promote language learning through communication with other learners and with the environment itself. Howard Rheingold (1993), author of The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier, defines virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (para. 6). The key to this definition is that people in virtual communities carry on discussions with “sufficient human feeling.” In other words, virtual communities emerge not out of idle contact with other people through an electronic
medium, but through personal interactions with one another. Those personal interactions, I would argue, make Second Life, Livemocha, and World of Warcraft as popular as they are today and are what make them particularly valuable for foreign language acquisition. When people become connected to a virtual network, when they begin to value their interactions with others in the environment, when they begin to notice how their language acquisition affects others and their ability to communicate on an emotional level, they then begin to see the purpose of a foreign language. They then connect to that language because it allows them to connect to others.

Although the three environments described and analyzed in this thesis are virtual communities, they differ in terms of the people who form the community and the ways the community members interact with one another. Livemocha, for example, is a community primarily based on “real life” identity. Most people on the site are transparent with their identities, often using their “real” names as their screen names and a “real” photograph as their digital representation of themselves. The people I interviewed in this space seem to want to learn a language specifically so they may communicate with people in their material world, whereas those in Second Life and World of Warcraft often take on an alternate persona, a true avatar, who represents a fantastical version of themselves designed to focus on their imagination. Through this alternate identity, users in this environment are able to learn a language by being someone they cannot be in a physical world. This alternate identity allows them to focus on foreign language acquisition without the typical constraints that someone might experience face-to-face while also gaining language skills they can apply to real world scenarios.
Types of Learning that Occur

No learner fits easily in a specific mold, so having options for language learning allows him or her to explore different avenues of his or her personality and language skills. Each environment differs in terms of the layout (space) and intended outcomes, so the learner is responsible for determining if the type of learning that takes place in each environment is ideal for him or herself. Furthermore, each environment encourages different forms of learning based on the level of formal pedagogical structure implemented within it as well as on the layout of the space itself. Therefore, the space chosen should be determined in large part by the specific needs of the learner.

The structure of each environment relates to the idea of spatial rhetoric, which is the way in which the layout of the space contributes to the activity that occurs within it and the resulting messages that emanate from it. As the analysis in the previous five chapters has hopefully revealed, each digital space—Second Life, Livemocha, and World of Warcraft—has a different layout that allows users to perform specific tasks that lend themselves to different forms of language learning. One form of language learning is not necessarily or better or worse than another but different, and an environment does not necessarily lead to more fruitful language learning just because it is more interactive, colorful, “sexier,” or three-dimensional than its predecessors. Nor is the environment incapable of promoting language learning simply because it was originally designed for entertainment rather than for explicit language instruction.

Additionally, a combination of different environments may be necessary for well-rounded language instruction and for addressing learners’ primary learning needs. A
student who prefers structured learning before informal communication with native
speakers may choose to begin in Livemocha before venturing into Second Life or World
of Warcraft. Conversely, someone who prefers the playful, informal nature of an
MMORPG may begin with World of Warcraft to accumulate vocabulary before moving
to Livemocha or Second Life to receive more formalized instruction. The digital space
itself leads to different forms of learning, so one should choose the space most
appropriate for the type of language learning he or she most seeks.

Georgia Leigh McGregor (2006) of the University of South Wales alludes to this
idea in her differentiation between architecture and landscape in videogames. She
suggests that architecture in games refers to parts of the environment that do not replicate
natural scenery in the real world whereas landscape refers to elements that do. Some
environments, she argues, privilege architecture as “a spatial experience,” meaning they
offer discrete zones which we can enter and which we cannot (para. 14). In these
environments, architecture serves as “containers for specific purposes,” and “we guide
our avatar through the intricacies of the game world looking through their eyes” (para.
14). Digital architecture can also serve as a “symbolic association with the functions and
results that architecture houses in reality” (para. 15), meaning the virtual architecture
represents only what we use it for and does not allow us to interact with it as we might
with a similar structure in our material world. The architecture and landscape of each
digital environment contributes in large part to the types of knowledge users can gain
from it.
Along the lines of spatial rhetoric, *Second Life* is an open platform—highly adaptable, easily navigated, and capable of incorporating learner customization through literal building. The three-dimensional structure of the environment lends itself to language learning that is highly immersive and interactive, giving learners opportunities to socialize, create, and explore. Based on Bartle’s (1996) player archetypes, we can see that this environment may promote language learning for a variety of learner types. However, it may be most beneficial for those who classify themselves as socializers or
explorers since the environment contains no inherent “achievements” or “killing” of other players or objects in the traditional sense. Also, because the environment allows residents to “teleport” from location to location in addition to walking or flying and to build any sort of structure to their liking, it allows them to suspend reality, to focus on language learning in contexts that would not occur in “real life.” Figure 6.2, for example, shows a fantastical castle built by a Second Life resident. Without restrictions in architecture, residents can explore their imaginations and use the world to combine in-world goals
with those outside of the program. In other words, residents can engage in meaningful language interactions within the environment that need not conform to traditional notions of proper language learning, but they can then apply skills learned in the environment to face-to-face interactions in the target language.

Language learning in this environment tends to be highly imaginative and interactive and works well for learners who enjoy tactical and visual sensations. Because learners can digitally touch, move, and build objects that teach them a foreign language, they can also see that language skills extend beyond text and speech into creation, of meaning, of space, and of interactions. Additionally, the ability to socialize in Second Life, as well as in the other two platforms, makes it an environment rife with opportunities to practice one's target language skills both formally and informally.

Livemocha

Livemocha, of course, was designed primarily around the concept of tandem learning; the intended goal of the site is to encourage language acquisition. Unlike Second Life and World of Warcraft, the environment is not three-dimensional, and users cannot “build” structures. Also, there is no “architecture” or “landscape” in the traditional sense. However, users can build interactions with other users by completing and commenting on others’ language activities and by participating in chat discussion. This environment is ideal for learners who crave interaction with native speakers and desire more direct feedback on their language progress. For learners who wish to learn both formal and informal language skills, this site gives them the opportunity. Although users
can pick and choose links and activities throughout the site, they are limited in that they
cannot move through an avatar. They cannot, in other words, fly, walk, or teleport a
digital representation of themselves through the environment. Rather, they construct their
identity largely through text, video, and audio conversations and two-dimensional
images. Most users on the site seem to be transparent with their identities, often using
their real first and/or last names as their screen name. This is likely due to the more
formalized spatial structure of the site and its original intention. Thus, the structure in
large part determines the type of interactions within it. Nevertheless, users can “play” in
the environment, holding interactive, personal conversations with other people, or
choosing a 2-D picture that does not represent their “real life” identity.

The type of learning that occurs in this environment can be both structured or
unstructured, or a combination of both, depending on the user’s preferences. After
completing pre-designed language activities in formal grammatical forms, users can then
practice them with real people, receiving feedback on whether what they are saying
and/or typing “makes sense.” In doing so, they extend learning beyond simply
memorizing grammatical and syntactical forms to making meaningful connections with
other people in a community designed to promote language learning. From my own
personal experience, I learned that this environment was

_**World of Warcraft**_

McGregor (2006) says that “*World of Warcraft* uses architecture and landscape as
an organisational system that contains activity and builds on usage patterns from real
life” (para. 36). The layout of this environment in particular acts symbolically too, because certain architectural elements represent their intended uses rather than functioning as they might in the material world. For instance, an “inn” represents a safe haven where one can “rest,” but in reality one’s avatar does not sleep in the space. The World of Warcraft environment operates around the concept of play—moving, interacting, and killing in a game. The layout is similar to Second Life in that it is 3-D and that players can move from location to location in a variety of ways unavailable to them in a traditional scenario, such as flying atop a bird’s back or using an orb to transport
themselves to a new island. However, the environment is structured much more on navigation than Second Life. Learners who struggle with navigation, like myself, may struggle to advance in the game, at least individually, if they cannot literally read the map. This mirrors real-world scenarios in which personal limitations may discourage language learning in particular contexts. On the other hand, a knack for navigation may strengthen one’s enjoyment and interaction within the game.

The type of learning that occurs in this environment focuses on reaching in-world goals and doing so through social signifiers from the game. Language learning is less structured, more informal, than in Livemocha and potentially Second Life. However, it attaches language interaction to immediate goals, allowing players to perceive consequences of inadequate target language skills. Thus, language learning in this environment could serve as a motivational factor and as a complement to other, more “structured” or “formal” forms of language instruction.

**Limitations & Opportunities**

Overall, the ability of these platforms and others like them to promote language learning through a digital medium should be further delved into. In particular, future researchers should investigate more in depth how virtual culture is created in these environments and what the implications of this are. Additionally, future research should examine how cultural factors affect the choice of virtual environment to participate in and the quality of language learning that occurs within it. Similarly, future research could
look at how concepts such as gender and race factor into language learning in digital spaces, if they do.

Although each of these environments seems to offer numerous benefits for language learners, no study is without its limitations. Because of the short timeframe of this study, approximately four months, the number of participant interviews and amount of time for participant observation was limited. In the future, a more detailed look at foreign language learning in multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) over an extended period of time would allow for additional interviews, more extensive interaction in each environment, and possibly analysis using different theories. Future interactions could help us delve further into how these specific environments encourage language learning and offer implications in even more theoretical fields while further ensuring the validity of the analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

Because of the qualitative and highly theoretical nature of the study, results cannot be generalized to an overall population. In the future, perhaps a quantitative component could be added to the study to complement the qualitative data. For instance, randomly selecting users in each environment and surveying them on their language acquisition in the platform would allow for statistical analysis of learning in the environment and potentially allow for a greater number of participants in the study. It would be important, however, to ensure that interactions still remained highly detailed to provide a thick description of how each environment lends itself to language learning.
Expanding Languages

Because of my previous experiences with Spanish, my research focused predominantly on interactions with native Spanish speakers learning English and native English speakers learning Spanish. Therefore, it is limited to two languages. It is possible that different languages would lend themselves to different interactions in these three environments. Future research should investigate learning in different languages and potentially expand on how cultural factors and location of learners affects their ability to learn a language in certain digital platforms. Doing so would add additional layers of complexity to the study and allow researchers to investigate the relationship between cultural influences and learner types in the environment. It would also be interesting to investigate whether learners from particular cultures prefer certain types of digital spaces and types of digital language learning.

Additional Environments

This study looked at three virtual environments in relation to language learning when in reality there are thousands of such spaces. Future research should investigate other environments like these and their potential to promote language acquisition. Chances are, providing even more options for language learners will make their experience learning languages even more customizable, productive, and enjoyable.
Implications

A rhetorically informed theory of language learning in virtual environments has several implications for learners, teachers, and researchers. For learners, it implies that they have new avenues for learning a language through customization and interaction with others. For instructors, it means they can provide supplemental instruction for learners, that the ways their students learn is becoming increasingly complex, and that they must find ways to navigate these environments to promote language learning. For teachers, it also supposes that they should provide students with digital options in addition to the traditional face-to-face class so that learners may find what works best for them and so they may capitalize on Gregory Ulmer’s (2003) concept of electracy. It also indicates that one environment may not be enough for each learner because language learning is dynamic, and so are learners. Someone who wishes to pick up casual conversational cues in a target language, for example, and who enjoys the interactive nature of a videogame might benefit more from *World of Warcraft* than *Livemocha* or *Second Life*. Similarly, a learner who craves structure when learning would benefit from *Livemocha*, and *Second Life* could offer an intermediate between the two. Additionally, a learner can use a combination of the three environments to learn different aspects of a language in each.

For researchers in both gaming and language learning, these environments and others like them provide opportunities to deconstruct the notion of a game and to investigate how spaces originally designed for entertainment differ from those designed specifically for language learning. Furthermore, for rhetoricians this study calls for
application of theories to new digital spaces and for the need to combine rhetorical analysis with theories from other disciplines to provide a more multi-faceted, complete picture of language learning.
APPENDIX A

IRB Exemption Determination Letter

Dear Dr. Holmevik,

The Chair of the Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) validated the protocol identified above using Exempt review procedures and a determination was made on February 11, 2010, that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as Exempt from continuing review under Category B2, based on the Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46). You may begin this study.

Please remember that no change in this research protocol can be initiated without prior review by the IRB. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) immediately. You are requested to notify the ORC when your study is completed or terminated.

Please review the Responsibilities of Principal Investigators (available at http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/regulations.html) and the Responsibilities of Research Team Members (available at http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/regulations.html) and be sure these documents are distributed to all appropriate parties.

Good luck with your study and please feel free to contact us if you have any questions. Please use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

All the best,

Nalinee

Nalinee D. Patin
IRB Coordinator
Clemson University
Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Voice: (864) 656-0636
Fax: (864) 656-4475
E-Mail: npatin@clemson.edu
Web site: http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/
**Consent Form for In-Person Interviews**

*Reciprocal Learning: An Investigation of Virtual Foreign Language Acquisition*

**Description of the research and your participation**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Jan Holmevik, along with Anna Beth Wilkerson. The purpose of this research is to examine the ways that foreign language learners acquire a target language in a virtual environment such as Livemocha (www.livemocha.com), Second Life (www.secondlife.com), and World of Warcraft (www.worldofwarcraft.com).

If you are a user of one of these platforms, your participation will involve partaking in chat conversations and/or emails through one of the aforementioned environments. If you are interviewed in person, the interview will be recorded via an audio recorder and later transcribed with your permission.

The amount of time required for your participation will range anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour per session, for as many sessions as you are willing to participate in, over the duration of two months.

**Risks and discomforts**

There are no known risks associated with this research, and you will not be required to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable with. You are also allowed at any time to go “off the record” and request that your conversation not be logged or recorded or to request that your identity remain anonymous.

**Potential benefits**

There are no known physical benefits for you that would result from your participation in this research. However, this research may help both us and you to understand better how foreign language learners acquire a new language in a virtual environment.

**Protection of confidentiality**

All chat logs, emails, and transcriptions will be stored on a personal, password-protected computer that contains up-to-date security software and will be destroyed five years following the beginning of this research. Consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed three years following the completion of the final written
report. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study without your consent.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential unless you agree to disclosure of your identity or as required by law.

My name may be used in publications or presentations subject to my permission below.

Yes ______ No _________

[Please Initial]

Voluntary participation
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

Contact information
If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Jan Holmevik at Clemson University at jholmev@clemson.edu or (864) 656-3193 or Anna Beth Wilkerson at awilker@clemson.edu or (864) 363-7956. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Institutional Review Board at (864) 656-6460.

Consent
A copy of this consent form should be given to you.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my consent to participate in this study.

Participant’s signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________
Consent Prompts for Online Interviews

For Native/Fluent English speakers:

- Hello, I am researching foreign language learning in [Livemocha, Second Life, World of Warcraft] for my graduate thesis. Would you like to participate in my study? There is a possibility that the results will be published.
- Would you prefer to chat in English or Spanish?
- You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study. Are you 18 or older?
- Is it all right with you if I record this conversation log? Parts of it may appear in my final report.
- Is it okay if I use your full name and/or screen name in my report? You may choose to remain anonymous or “go off the record” at any time. Just let me know.
- This interview should last no more than an hour, but you can discontinue it at any time.
- Is it all right if I contact you for a follow-up interview? What is your preferred method of contact?
- If you have any questions, you can email me at awilker@clemson.edu.

For Native/Fluent Spanish speakers:

- ¿Usted prefiere conversar en inglés o español para este estudio?
- Usted necesita tener por lo menos 18 años de edad para participar en este estudio. ¿Usted tiene 18 años o más de edad?
- ¿Estaría bien si yo documento esta conversación con usted? Partes de la conversación pueden ser publicadas en mi tesis final.
- ¿Estaría bien si uso su nombre completo o nombre de internet en mi tesis? También puede permanecer anónimo o fuera de contexto en cualquier momento. Solo me tiene que dejar saberlo.
- Esta entrevista no debería durar más que una hora, pero puede pararla en cualquier momento.
- ¿Puedo contactarle a usted en el futuro para otra entrevista en caso que sea necesario? ¿Cuál es su método preferido para ser contacto?
- Si usted tiene alguna pregunta, puede escribirme a mi correo electrónico a awilker@clemson.edu.
Verification of Translation

Jorge Silva  
10734 NW 88th Ave.  
Hialeah, FL 33018  

Clemson IRB  
223 Brackett Hall  
Box 345704  
Clemson, SC 29634  

January 30, 2010  

To Whom It May Concern:  

I, Jorge Silva, am a native Spanish speaker and certify that I have read and edited the translated materials provided by Anna Beth Wilkerson. I believe that the materials will be understandable to the potential participants and convey the same message as expressed in the corresponding English-language version.  

If you have any questions regarding this translation, you may contact me at jorgesantiagosilva@hotmail.com or (786) 539-9542.  

Sincerely,  

Jorge Silva  

(letter emailed directly to IRB office from Mr. Silva on February 8, 2010).
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151


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159


