

# Massively Semiotic Ecologies and L2 Development: Gaming Cases and Issues<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract.** In dialectic tension with the immense growth in digital information and communication media, Internet information and communication technologies have amplified conventional communicative practices in the areas of breadth, impact, and speed and also have enabled the emergence of new communicative, cultural, and cognitive practices. These practices emerge within distinctive cultures-of-use—that is, the process wherein communication tools and the practices they mediate co-evolve (Thorne, 2003). With these aforementioned issues as context, this article begins by describing contradictory appraisals of the perceived value and complexity of new and ‘sociable media’ (Donath, 2004) environments. This is followed by a discussion of the diverse semiotic ecology comprising the widely played massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* (hereafter WoW), including routine player engagement with written texts and exposure to multiple languages, assessment of the linguistic complexity of texts designated as highly important by players, and consideration of attendant textual and expressive activity occurring outside of the game, with the purpose of better understanding the potential usefulness of online gaming, and WoW in particular, as a setting for language use and learning.

## 1 Introduction

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has an approximately fifty-year history as a sub-field of second language development (SLD) and applied linguistics research (for discussions, see Bax, 2003; Chapelle, 2009; Hubbard, 2009). The preponderance of existing CALL research has focused on in-class or instructionally related uses of technology and many useful and consistently corroborated findings have emerged from this literature (for recent reviews, see Chun, 2008; Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004; Thorne & Payne, 2005; Thorne, 2008a). Expanding out from these earlier

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investigations, the present article explores the potential for language learning in freely chosen 'sociable media' contexts, which, following Donath (2004: n.p.), I define as mediated environments that are specifically engineered to support rich and varied communicative dynamics and the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal connection (see also Thorne, 2009). Online games, especially massively multiplayer games, are here described as a special case sociable media.

The article begins with a demographic contextualization of sociable media and its often polarized academic and popular press reception. This is followed by the presentation of a distributed and ecological systems approach to human action and development which provides a rationale for carefully assessing the social-interactive and linguistic qualities of digitally mediated environments. I then focus on a specific and widely played massively multiplayer online (MMO) game called *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment), including discussion of the attendant discourses that have emerged in related online communities. Discussion of the potential efficacy of online gaming worlds for language learning is informed by responses to a cross-national survey of active players in two countries – the Netherlands and the United States, and through analyses of the linguistic complexity of high frequency game-generated and player produced texts associated with this game. The presentation then moves to a general discussion of the resources and potential constraints of participation in gaming environments as these experiences relate to the potential for second language development.

### 1.1 Mediated Life Activity and Its Valorisation and Condemnation

Assessing the language developmental value of participation in digital environments is no easy task. The sheer number of what might now be termed conventional Internet-mediated tools, such as email, threaded discussion fora and message boards, synchronous chat and video conferencing, textual virtual worlds, and blogging (to present only a selective list) have been joined by highly popular social and community media environments such as twitter, *facebook* and its many language and region specific siblings (such as *Netlog* and *Hyves* in the Low Countries, *V Kontakte* in Russia, *Orkut* in Brazil, *Qzone* in China). The most globally distributed of these social media environments – *facebook* – is impressive in terms of its user populations. In a recent press release (December, 2011), *facebook* reports 845 million monthly active users, 80% of which are outside of the U.S. and Canada, with the average user having connections to 130 'friends' (<http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>). Given that the global internet user population is estimated to be more than 2.2 billion (as of December, 2011; see [internetworldstats.com](http://internetworldstats.com)), these demographical statistics are noteworthy, especially since omnipresent as well as casual users of social media participate of their own volition, arguably because the interactions, sharing, and exchanges that occur there serve important social-relational, psychological, and informational needs.

Online gaming is also immensely popular and arguably constitutes one of the most complex forms of media-based entertainment. The telecommunications researcher Edward Castronova (2005) has estimated that synthetic worlds (his term for online virtual spaces) were appearing at a rate of Moore's Law, or doubling in volume every two years, and that minimally, the global population across all synthetic worlds was 10 million players averaging 20-30 hours of play time per week. Only six years later,