Chapter 9
Video Game–Based L2 Learning:
Virtual Worlds as Texts, Affinity Spaces, and Semiotic Ecologies

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ABSTRACT

Video/digital games have grown into sophisticated, realistic, and engaging problem-solving virtual worlds that have their own literacy practices, affinity spaces, and online virtual communities. As a result, various studies have examined theirs to promote L2 learning and literacy. The findings of these studies suggest that digital games can promote multilingual communication, L2 vocabulary development, and situated L2 use. However, promising these findings, to-date little is known about the specific dynamics of gameplay that can facilitate L2 learning. To address this gap in the literature, this chapter will draw on interdisciplinary research on digital gaming from literacy studies, games' studies, and narratology to account for the L2 learning potentials of digital games. To explain their L2 learning potentials, the chapter will conceptualize digital games as dynamic texts, affinity spaces, and semiotic ecologies, and discuss the implications of each conceptualization for game-based L2 learning and teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades recent innovations in digital technology and special effects have transformed digital gaming from a frivolous and childish form of entertainment into a sophisticated and widespread recreational activity. Video games have advanced in design to involve complex plots, compelling narratives, and immersive detail-rich 3D virtual worlds (Squire, 2002). This transformation has led to a massive expansion in the consumer-base of digital games to include different genders and age groups. For instance, 40% of all gamers today are females, and the average age of a video-gamer is 31 (Entertainment Software Association, 2014). Also, with the spread of local-area-networks (LANs) and high-speed Internet, video gaming has acquired a social dimension, especially with the rise of online multiplayer games that require players to collaborate in online gaming servers to achieve shared in-game goals (e.g. kill a monster). Multiplayer gaming usually involves active communication and continuous interaction between players face-to-face or online through internet-mediated communication tools (e.g. chat) to plan gameplay and coordinate shared action. In addition, the popularity of digital games along with the rise of user-created content in Web 2.0 technologies have given rise to online virtual communities centered on digital gaming and gameplay strategies. Over time these communities have grown in size and sophistication, and they developed their own social structures, sociocultural values, and literacy practices (Steinkuehler, 2006). Some of the common practices in these communities include: (a) writing, sharing, and discussing strategy guides; (b) writing, reviewing, and editing fan fiction based on video games' narratives and characters; (c) planning and coordinating shared gameplay; (d) creating and sharing gameplay resources such as gaming mods (i.e. modified game content), cheat codes (i.e. codes that enhance a player's capabilities in a video game), and game save-files (i.e. files that save gameplay progress to grant a player access to any level in a game), and; (e) video-recording and streaming of live gameplay and game strategy tutorials (i.e. video demonstrations of gameplay strategies). Besides the dominance of language-mediated interactions and literacy practices in online gaming communities, recent research on digital game-based L2 use demonstrated that L2 gaming is a common and popular activity among a significant proportion of L2 learners (Chik, 2011), and recent studies on extramural L2 gaming suggest that digital gaming can offer an engaging and immersive environment for L2 use and practice (e.g. Jensen, 2017).

The popularity of digital gaming among L2 learners (Chik, 2011), the engagement of gameplay activities (Squire, 2002), and the centrality of language use and literacy practices in gaming communities (Alexander, 2009) have motivated various studies that explored the L2 learning potentials of digital gaming (for a thorough review see Reinders, 2012). The findings of these studies suggested that digital games can

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