The use of a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) as a tool for English language education

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This qualitative research investigated the use of a commercial massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) as a tool in English language education involving learners based in Japan. The aims of this exploratory research were to establish the viability of this type of computer game as a platform for a computer assisted language learning (CALL) project, and to collect data on learner attitudes and interaction. This activity was undertaken in order to establish if playing the game would elicit types of interaction identified as beneficial in second language acquisition (SLA) research. A longitudinal study was conducted over the course of the 2011-2012 academic year and involved undergraduate intermediate level learners of English as a foreign language based at Kyoto University. The learners participated in weekly game sessions in a popular commercial MMORPG. Participant transcript data was collected over a sustained period and was subject to discourse analysis. This source of data was supplemented by researcher observation and learner feedback collected from a post-study questionnaire. The data analysis reveals a number of significant findings. The transcript and observation data shows that although the participants encountered a number of difficulties during their game play as this research progressed they became increasingly comfortable. This finding indicates that MMORPGs may represent viable platforms for CALL projects involving intermediate level learners of English. Analysis of the linguistic output produced during the gaming sessions further provides evidence that during interaction with other players in the game the participants engaged in forms of purposeful interaction associated with SLA. In this context, significant forms of interaction identified in the data included collaborative dialogue involving assistance, co-construction and the consistent production of coherent target language linguistic output. Moreover, it was found that the learners engaged in forms of social interaction involving the appropriate use of politeness and the establishment and maintenance of collaborative relationships. These were based on reciprocity and the frequent exchange of personal information. The data indicates that the above forms of interaction facilitated the operation of states of intersubjectivity. Learner feedback was broadly positive. The participants identified a number of benefits of participating in this research including opportunities for risk-taking, fluency practice and exposure to new vocabulary not normally encountered in traditional language classrooms. The findings of this study have been reported in the publications listed below. The positive findings of this research will form the basis of future studies that are now in the planning stage. This work will seek to further explore the potential of MMORPGs as tools that provide a means to facilitate language learning through interaction.
References
