

Language Power-levellers:
Analysing the Strategies Employed by Self-regulated Learners in the Digital Wilds

Dana H. Kirkpatrick

A Thesis

In the Department

of

Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Applied Linguistics) at

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

August 2025

© Dana H. Kirkpatrick, 2025

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**School of Graduate Studies**

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Dana H. Kirkpatrick

Entitled: Language Power-levellers: Analysing the Strategies Employed by Self-regulated Learners in the Digital Wilds

and submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Applied Linguistics)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final Examining Committee:

_____ Examiner

Dr. Michael Barcomb

_____ Thesis Supervisor

Dr. Walcir Cardoso

Approved by

Dr. Walcir Cardoso, Chair of Department of Education

Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean of Arts and Science

ABSTRACT

Language Power-levellers:

Analysing the Strategies Employed by Self-regulated Learners in the Digital Wilds

Dana H. Kirkpatrick

This study explored the language learning strategies utilized by successful autonomous English learners in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), with particular attention given to the intersection of player identity and second language communication practices. Drawing on six semi-structured interviews with MMORPG players from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, this research acts as an exploratory study of how learners navigate the digital wilds to develop their language proficiency outside of traditional classroom contexts.

Using a hybrid approach integrating thematic coding of self-regulation to describe participant learning approaches and a modified Critical Discourse Analysis to address interplay of identity, this study identifies two categories of learning strategies and two categories of learner identity types. The categories of strategies are those involving learning by oneself (e.g., solo research, use of translation tools, online resources) and those involving learning with others communicatively (e.g., peer feedback, Reddit discussion, and collaborative play). These strategies were then examined through the lens of identity performance in relation to avatar customization choices, role or job selection in game, and communication preferences in game and out.

Findings indicate that participants strategically position themselves in digital communities, generally preferring support roles and text-based interactions to manage linguistic risk and reduce chances of miscommunication. Some learners, classified as conscious strategists, exhibited high self-awareness in adapting communication strategies to

social contexts. The learners classified as immersive learners were more focused on interaction without any specific focus on their language beyond its use as a vehicle to accomplish goals in game or for talking with friends. Learners from both groups additionally reported a perceived decline in public patience toward non-native English speakers, as well as toward new players in online spaces more generally, a shift that was not present in earlier gaming communities.

This research contributes to our understanding of informal, socially embedded language learning in online gaming environments. It highlights how learner autonomy is enacted through identity-driven strategy use, and how communities in the digital wilds (specifically MMORPG communities) serve as complex, multimodal ecosystems for language development. The implications extend to digital language pedagogy, encouraging educators to draw on game-based identities to foster authentic language use. This is particularly valuable for learners motivated by community belonging, self-expression, and interaction, or otherwise not well served by traditional language learning approaches in schools.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Walcir Cardoso, for his endless guidance, support, and cheerful encouragement throughout this research project. Thanks to his insights and patience with me, I have been able to see this project evolve from a classroom daydream to completed thesis.

Additional appreciation goes to Dr. Michael Barcomb, who generously gave his time and energy to review my proposal and thesis, even on short notice. Your constructive feedback and comments not only improved my work but undoubtedly saved me several hours in redrafting and clarifications. For your dedication to my work, I cannot thank you enough.

This thesis would not have been half the work it is without the support of my loving partner, Kat. Your unconditional love and unwavering faith in me have been the anchor of hope that kept me going on even the most difficult of days. Both near and far you have spurred me on to be a better academic and a better writer. Your support has inspired me throughout this work and beyond it.

To my family, especially my mother, father, and my younger sibling, your support from afar has never felt stronger than during my academic journeys. No matter the continent, the unending love and encouragement you brought to our phone calls and Discord messages never left my mind, thank you.

Finally, I'd like to thank the Warriors of Light, Heroes, Champions of Azeroth, Guardians, and Adventurers that make up the diverse Massively Multiplayer Online Game communities that inspired this research. Time and again, I have been shown immense friendship and camaraderie by people living oceans away. I am deeply indebted to the participants of this study, as well as the wonderful communities of guildmates and friends that I have made over the years.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Thesis	1
Motivating the Study Through Personal Experience	1
Self-taught Learners.....	2
This Thesis	2
Chapter 2: The Manuscript.....	4
Background	4
The Digital Wilds.....	4
Autonomous Language Learning.....	5
Online Learning Strategies	6
Language Learning in Off-the-Shelf Games.....	8
Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis in an Online Ethnography	9
Describing Identity	10
The Current Study.....	12
Method	13
Research Design.....	13
Participants	15
Instruments	16
Procedure	16
Data Collection and Analysis	17
Results	19
Discussion	24
Implications.....	27
Limitations and Future Studies	28
Conclusion	28

Chapter 3: Concluding Remarks	30
Overview of Thesis	30
Summary of Findings.....	31
Implications for L2 Education and Research.....	34
Future Development.....	35
References	36
Appendices	40
Appendix A.	40
Appendix B	41
Appendix C.	43

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1. Learning Strategy Types</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Figure 2. Theme-by-Participant Summary Table (Participants 1-6)</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Figure 3. Perception of Social Tolerance of Learners</i>	<i>23</i>

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Thesis

Motivating the Study Through Personal Experience

From the time I was old enough to hold a controller, I have been a gamer. Being the fourth child of five and following in the footsteps of three older brothers, a lot of my communal time growing up was built around playing video games. At the same time, these experiences expanded my vocabulary as I learned by playing and interacting in these natural play environments. Being the daughter of an English literature major and lawyer, however, meant that dinner discussions were always a little more cerebral, asking questions about *why* things were the way they were and *how* we can describe them as such.

Growing up in the boom of technology that brought about the earliest iPods and iPhones, the departure of dial-up and arrival of high-speed internet meant that many afternoons in my childhood home were spent playing online games, both with my siblings, and with strangers who would turn out to become lifelong friends. Some of these friends did not speak English as a first language and were picking it all up on the fly, yet their language abilities never bothered me: I could understand them just fine, and they managed to get by in our online communities just like any other members.

It was only when I got older and started learning foreign languages of my own that I realized that this was no small feat. I tried (and failed) to play and integrate in German online communities while learning the language. I later tried again with Japanese with mixed success, likely owing more to my completed bachelor's degree in the language than to the interactions I had online. Even still, the majority of my interactions in online communities still occur in English despite my ability to speak English, Japanese, and French (sorry, German). This dichotomy struck me as odd; *why* are some people able to pick up languages

in online communities and integrate into them better than other people? More importantly, *how* can we describe the people who pull off this grand achievement?

Self-taught Learners

Thus began my search into autonomous language learners outside of the classroom and outside of conventional approaches. Many studies have already examined the pedagogical usefulness of commercial games for language learning, particularly in relation to students' test scores (Sundqvist, 2019; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). Other research has shown how classrooms can assign online games as homework to improve student interaction (Peterson, 2012). However, in my experience, many of the friends and allies I had met were flunking their high school English classes yet still logging on to complete challenging game content that required precise communication and comprehension of complex tasks that need to be executed in specific ways. Were my most successful companions creating flashcards to remember the terminology? Were they translating everything back to their native language to comprehend it? Were they even considering how they were approaching the language aspect of learning, or were they merely treating English as a vehicle to take them to the destination of cooperative play?

The question of what these players do to progress their language skills is important. However, further analysis of what attracts these types of learners to such an environment and how they present themselves in it can provide an even deeper understanding of interactive approaches to language learning that are often overlooked in classroom-oriented study.

This Thesis

This manuscript-based thesis examines the language learning strategies and identity-related practices of successfully self-taught English learners who have learned English in the communities of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), as well as whether there is an intersection between how these players express their identities in the online worlds and their

success. It uses critical discourse analysis to examine and ethnographically describe the interactions of this subset of online players, exploring the intersection of their identities with their communicative practices and approaches to linguistic development. It is motivated by the work of Rosas and Dhen (2012), whose critical discourse analysis of French World of Warcraft players examined the interplay of identity construction and social interaction. This study inspired me to conduct a similar analysis of how individuals construct their identities while using social interaction to navigate a digital environment in a new language.

This research contributes to the field of applied linguistics by investigating the real-world experiences of successful language learners in a non-education setting in the digital wilds (Sauro & Zourou, 2019; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). Through understanding the behaviours, approaches, and similarities of the participants as gleaned from their responses to a semi-structured interview, we may better expand our acceptance of varied approaches to language learning, and validate a richer community of learners, regardless of how formal their language learning settings may or may not be. As such, this research aims to describe these learners and prepare the field for similar types of learners who will emerge from the digital wilds as technological innovations and integrations continue to expand.

As per the guidelines for a manuscript-based MA thesis, the next section constitutes “a full submittable draft of a manuscript” which presents the full literature review, methodology, results, and discussion of the heretofore mentioned research.

Chapter 2

Background

The Digital Wilds

With the inseparable entanglement of technology in modern life, it has become increasingly clear that academic ventures seeking to describe sociological or sociolinguistic phenomena must expand beyond the limitations of just one device or webpage to glean the impact it has on us. As such, the term “digital wilds” acts as a catch-all for the online (digital) spaces where socialization occurs without the formal regulation of workplaces, governments, or other private entities (therefore, *wild*) (Sauro & Zourou, 2019). It is broader than single media apps like TikTok and YouTube, and broader than the term social media. The digital wilds include all these spaces as well as the private interactions held between community members that can create a given space of culture, whether through the messaging or commenting systems of those websites themselves, or external examples of Skype calls, Discord messages, and even emails or text messages.

It has been demonstrated that these spaces involve unique literacies and social practices (Sauro, 2017; Shafirova & Cassany, 2019) that often start as, or become, a practice of community culture or “fandom” for a given media. Within these spaces, members build a sense of identity and display digital literacy through their performed digital identities within the expected norms of their community, while still being dynamically free to invest as much or as little participation and collaboration into that community as they wish to (Shafirova & Cassany, 2019). In the context of language learning, it is the possibility for recursive interaction within the community across so many vectors that is worth describing further.

Suddenly, the possible learning tools in the digital wilds seem to include all digital media and the plethora of entire online communities. For learning to be considered as happening in the digital wilds, however, it must be a place which is not created by, nor

governed by an educational body and its curriculum guidelines, nor can the purpose of the space be to promote learning language. Nay, learning in the digital wilds is self-motivated, often circumstantial, and less structured than a language learning course (Sauro & Zourou, 2019). Language learning in the digital wilds is often classified as extramural (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012) and is not necessarily correlated with learner interest in learning the language in or for school itself, but it does show signs of positively influencing test scores (Sundqvist, 2019; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). The wilds exist as a distinct space, separate from academic institutions and methods.

One key engine behind interaction in these spaces is the motivation of the users both to learn, but also more specifically to learn as a vehicle of cultural belonging created by their self-inspired desires to understand or participate in the content or discourse present in the corner of wilds they are engaging in (Godwin-Jones, 2019). As will be discussed below, this autonomous journey is one where their peers, their environment, the content they consume, and the discourse they watch or participate in become their learning resources, should they choose to use them explicitly, or implicitly.

Autonomous Language Learning

Autonomous language learning is classified as being independent of teachers or learning institutions and can be demonstrated through learners setting their own goals, identifying or creating their own learning strategies and study plans, reflecting upon learned content, utilizing support and resources, and engaging in self-assessment (Bekleyen & Selimoğlu, 2016). Brevik (2016) details the self-motivated choice of successful adolescent language learners in Norway who learned more English and scored better compared to their peers by recreationally playing video games and engaging in English media in their free time. Her study attributes these “Gaming Outliers” with good English reading skills and poorer Norwegian reading skills as having found success through motivation related to their desire

to improve in their English-modulated games and the social standings therein, rather than in English as a language itself.

Besides this impact of motivation alone, it has been shown that learners who have independently learned in the past are more likely to succeed in future self-directed tasks, and that their success at meeting their own goals is often driven by their own awareness of having set them, and their ability to self-regulate their learning process (Du, 2013). This interplay between motivation and self-regulation creates a sketch of who successful autonomous language learners might be if they have exhibited this kind of individualistic approach before.

The concept of self-regulation is particularly relevant within the context of online learning, where learners often face the challenge of managing their learning environment without any immediate physical presence of instructors, peers, or course plans. To address this, learner self-regulation involves the process of being actively engaged in assessing and re-assessing all aspects of the learning process, including learners' personal goals, performance, access to resources, and utilization of various strategies to successfully support their learning process (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Higher levels of self-regulation in learners are correlated positively with success in learning (Botero & Questier, 2016; Lee et al., 2020). These characteristics, particularly users' capacity for self-regulation, become especially relevant when examining how they navigate online spaces and develop their own strategies in the absence of formal instruction.

Online Learning Strategies

Without a teacher to direct what or how students should learn, nor any assessments to delineate progress, learners must find successful methods for themselves to both progress in their learning goals and then assess that progress and their satisfaction with it. Hannibal Jensen (2019) details how young autonomous learners in the digital wilds would employ various unique strategies to overcome the language challenges that limited or restricted their

desired activities, effectively treating each intended outcome as a goal that they have set. One notable strategy was the use of inferencing to guess word meaning from context, which included referring to the native language to try and bridge understanding at times when the multimodal affordances of the digital media did not provide enough context on its own. Some learners additionally utilized Google Translate for quick dictionary translations that still maintained the context of the full sentence. More successful learners would use Google Translate critically, aware that it could produce imperfect translations that necessitated modification from their own competencies. Finally, the use of English itself to accomplish goals was also employed in instances of learners' generating more effective web-searches or for coding in video games like Minecraft.

In a more psychometric setting, these goal-based strategies would fit under the five autonomous learning strategy definitions that Tseng et al. (2006) describe; the first of which is commitment control. The idea behind the commitment control strategy is to focus on an intended end-product and assess what is necessary to be done if the favorable outcome is not achieved. Beyond this first approach, the second potential strategy is metacognitive control, which deals with maintaining concentration and habits and reducing procrastination. The third strategy is satiation control, which is the act of keeping the learning interesting by adding twists or other motivational upkeep. Emotion control marks the fourth strategy, which ensures the learners' moods are conducive to learning new content without disruption. Finally, environmental control describes the strategy of eliminating negative influences in learning or utilizing the environment at hand to positively result in successful learning. A learner may utilize any mixture of some or all of these strategies in the process of acquiring a language autonomously when engaging with media in the form of music, books, or hobby spaces like non-education-focused video games.

Language Learning in Off-the-Shelf Games

One such example of a learner using these strategies is the case study of Eldin, a 14-year-old Bosnian boy living in Sweden who taught himself English predominantly through playing commercial, off-the-shelf games (Sundqvist, 2015), which are games not originally designed for language learning. In order for language learning to occur from these types of games, there must be interaction between the language learning player and the target language, either through the game itself, or more robustly through the social contact that happens with other people in the game online, or in the sphere of fandom encircling the game online in chatrooms, comment sections, and general social media content. According to Sundqvist's (2013) Scale of Social Interaction Model, which is founded in a sociocultural theoretical approach to second language learning (Vygotsky, 1978), the larger the scale of social interaction in a game, such as in multiplayer, or massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), the higher the potential for learning language.

While this case study and many other larger studies have focused on adolescent learners, research examining adult players in similar informal, game-based learning contexts remains limited, a gap this study seeks to address. Likewise, although previous studies have demonstrated that there is already considerable correlation between playing even single-player games and higher English scores (Gee, 2003; Lee, 2017; Sundqvist 2019; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012), the present study shall focus on MMOs. Previously, MMOs have been used as out-of-school exercises to supplement classroom English learning (Li et al., 2022; Newgarden & Zheng, 2016; Peterson, 2012), where learners were able to use online games and their communities to learn English, even if the learners did not originally consider themselves gamers.

The interactive settings of MMOs create learning affordances that are rich with second language interaction and socialization (Shahrokni, 2021), with supportive

environments for language learning and sociocultural communities that encourage and inspire players to learn and take risks in their language development for the sake of interaction and progression both (Rama et al., 2012). This social component is of key interest in describing the negotiated identities of learners, an aspect that will be explored in the following section.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in an Online Ethnography

It is noted by Krzyżanowski (2011) that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework, which traditionally only explores lexico-grammatical meanings in written texts, has been expanded to allow for “more contextually oriented and actor-related types of analysis,” and therefore be used in more ethnographic settings. Thus, the sociocognitive approach of CDA entails examining the three-way relationship between discourse, cognition, and society, wherein social aspects are influential in responses (discourse) through how they are interpreted (cognition), and in turn discourse influences social participation through knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies (Van Dijk, 2001, 2016).

Online Ethnographies take advantage of the digital landscape afforded by the internet and examine internet users’ perceptions of communication online and how it affects their social relationships and performances of identity (Hine, 2001). Despite the remote nature of digital interaction, computer-mediated communication is still subject to critical analysis afforded by CDA, as digital communities and cultures are intertwined with social practices in these settings (Shafirova & Cassany, 2019).

One notable example of work which describes MMORPG players using CDA examined French players of World of Warcraft and how their identities were constructed collectively within and without the game through their player avatars (Rosas & Dhen, 2012). The findings showed that players would combine their real-life identities with their in-game selves. Additionally, they construct a sense of social belonging in their collectively built guilds. This process results in the creation of a version of the self that not only reflects their

true-life selves and interests but also integrates these elements into the core of their in-game social groups. Peterson (2012) likewise found that MMOs are rich with opportunities for social interaction and language exchange, especially given contexts where language-learning players had anonymity through nicknames and avatars to hide any potential embarrassment for linguistic misunderstandings.

Besides the linguistic immersion afforded, MMORPG players are immersed in the multimodal stimuli of the game world, which if taken advantage of continuously and intentionally can create a cooperative space both socially and in language learning (Newgarden & Zheng, 2016). Players grow to feel a sense of belonging and normalcy in game worlds thanks to the immersive graphics, sounds, or storytelling they employ. Because of the unique social environments of games such as these, any shifts to the structure, world, or narrative from what players are accustomed to is subject to player scrutiny - much like if someone's real life routines were changed suddenly or without personal input. Different personalities, or indeed, identities, might respond more strongly to change than others.

Describing Identity

Banks and Martey (2018) explain that players in online games can be highly sensitive to changes made by developers. When players have established, or are in the process of building, an identity in these digital spaces, changes to the game can feel like a threat to that identity. Modifications, whether cosmetic, narrative, or mechanical can alter how a player sees themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others. This disruption can occur when changes affect the game's appearance, the storyline, or even the goals and rewards that shape a player's in-game experience. Environmental changes can also alter a player's sense of place, while shifts in social dynamics like changes to group cohesion or coordination impact player collaboration and interaction.

These disruptions in the game world often mirror how individuals respond to changes in the real world. Just as personality and identity influence responses to real-world changes, they also shape how players respond to in-game changes. For example, in Banks and Martey's study, some players were resilient to changes between game expansions (the time periods where change was most likely), while others found them destabilizing. The researchers conclude that player communication within the game reflects how they perceive themselves and their social environment, offering valuable insights into how players construct and are perceived in terms of identity. Discerning player discourse in a critical way allows us to tap into that identity which players construct around online spaces and their peer groups.

The intersection of virtual identity (e.g., through game avatars), real identity, and projective identity (how one wants to be seen in the game space) goes beyond other empathetic or sympathetic relationships to fictional characters due to the nature of negotiating an identity which is not necessarily one's whole authentic self, but nevertheless is piloted by the true self in the real world (Gee, 2003). One might consider a similar parallel of introducing yourself in a new workplace, where no one knows you or your hobbies just yet, and you have a certain reputation you would like to build or a certain air you would like to give off to your new co-workers, perhaps different depending on the level of day-to-day engagement you are likely to have with them, or their status at your workplace. The depth of these virtual identities, and how much weight a given player gives to ensuring their avatar is similar or dissimilar to themselves varies from player to player (Rosas & Dhen, 2012), but nonetheless plays a part in socialization in online games, as well as in creating a motivating setting for risk-taking and rewarded learning.

The unique cultures and communities formed have been shown to create avenues and affordances for language learning (Newgarden & Zheng, 2016; Peterson, 2012; Ryu, 2013),

though further inspection of learning during multiplayer gameplay, and through the gaming culture itself is necessary to more clearly describe the population of successful autonomous language learners in massively multiplayer online games.

The Current Study and Research Questions

With the growing number of works set in the digital wilds that bring together autonomous language learning and MMOs, many studies fail to incorporate the language socialization that occurs holistically across both the game itself and its community on social media or peer-to-peer. There are many gaps in our understanding of learning strategies that work for autonomous learners in these settings, especially self-motivated students who picked up gaming without teacher assignments. Additionally, research on adults, rather than adolescents, is lacking in studies on autonomous learners who use or have used video games to acquire language. This difference of identity (as adults, gamers, and learners) and how the learners see themselves and are seen by others as fitting into the world is worth further inspection to describe a profile of their success. Furthermore, the impact that learners' digital socialization and identity negotiation has on their strategies for learning is necessary to answer questions about community, learners' place in it, and their success at learning more broadly.

A three-way critical analysis of these populations between discourse, cognition, and society may elucidate and expand on the sociolinguistic aspects of identity in MMO settings. Further research must be conducted to address social interaction dynamics to further solidify our understanding of who succeeds at self-learning in these contexts, and why. To better describe the strategies and social interplay of successful autonomous language learners who immerse themselves in MMORPGs contexts, this study seeks to examine the following two research questions:

RQ1. What are the predominant learning strategies employed by successful autonomous language learners in the digital wilds, particularly in their experiences in MMORPGs?

RQ2. Is there an interaction between reported learning strategies and player identity in creating a successful autonomous language learner?

Method

Research Design

This is an exploratory study that seeks to qualitatively explore what successful autonomous language learners are doing in the digital space of MMORPGs to successfully learn English and construct a snapshot of how these learners negotiate their identities in this space for their learning success. In accounting for previous studies on Multiplayer Online Games (Peterson, 2012; Sylvén & Sundqvist 2012) and digital spaces constituted as the digital wilds (Shafirova & Cassany, 2019), this study employs an online ethnographic approach (Hine, 2000) which mirrors the approach of Rosas and Dhen (2012) regarding participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and critical discourse analysis of collected data.

For the purposes of this study, an autonomous language learner is defined as a learner actively controlling their language learning process through self-regulated strategies and use of resources both within social interactions and external to them. This definition aligns itself with Godwin-Jones's explanation that social interaction allows for expanded individual autonomy, where language skills are developed and personal identity is expanded (2019). Importantly, the learners in this study have minimal-to-no formal intervention in their learning by way of teachers' assignments or recommendations that can impact their learning trajectory meaningfully. These learners demonstrate their autonomy through self-reflection on their language learning initiative and self reports of behavior during their language learning

journey. Successful autonomous learners also demonstrate persistence in overcoming any language barriers and achieving communicative competence in the environment(s) relevant to that language's use.

Questions were developed considering the themes embedded in the study's research questions (strategy use and identity interaction) and were informed by Critical Discourse Analysis in MMORPG settings. The questions investigate participants' experiences (e.g. community participation, language barriers, game-based motivators to learn) and strategies (e.g. goal setting, note-keeping, asking for peer help), evoking self-awareness and self-reflection of language growth, while tying language learning events or motivators with any relevant identity renegotiation (Sauro, 2017) in the context of the gaming community itself or communities beyond it.

The language-learning affordances of MMORPG spaces (Newgarden & Zheng, 2016; Rama, et al. 2012) were taken into consideration when participants are asked about their approach to learning English autonomously. Questions were formulated based on the acknowledgement that the digital wilds are a landscape which provide autonomy, and thereby autonomous learning of language therein relies on participant self-motivation and self-regulation relevant to their cultural contexts both digitally and physically (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Communicative-based strategies such as reliance on peers or purposefully seeking immersive environments are likely to be interplayed in MMORPG settings given the nature of such robust player bases. Interview instances where participants indicate behaviors or methods of language negotiation with the purpose of gaining linguistic knowledge will be analyzed to identify meaningful learning strategies of the digital wilds such as inferencing (guessing meaning from context), translation tool use, or goal-based motivation to learn (Hannibal Jenson, 2019), as well as intentional planning and self-evaluation in line with the array of self-regulated methods described by Tseng et al. (2006).

Participants

Six adult volunteer participants were selected for this study. A call for participants was posted on the social networking site Reddit under r/MMORPG to maximize the likelihood of relevant respondents to the crucial gaming aspect of this study. A self-report questionnaire (Appendix B) with purposeful criteria targeting players who had successfully learned a language autonomously by playing MMORPG(s) was designed by modifying two previously used questionnaires. The first of these was Sylvén and Sundqvist's (2012) questionnaire, which measured extramural English in school children. The second inspiration was Lee's (2019) interview questions examining Korean EFL learners' informal digital learning of English. Participants who were selected are those who indicate that they have learned English as a non-native language predominantly through digital wild engagement (especially on MMORPGs and their related media spaces). Additionally, the ideal candidates were those who indicated that their *main* source of English engagement has come from those online spaces, as opposed to other media. Research candidates were then contacted via their provided emails or social media and selected for further participation in the interview portion of the study.

A small sample of participants was the selection goal because of the exploratory nature of the study as well as the time necessary for data analysis in online ethnographic work, particularly in any potential video analysis. All participants were asked to consent to participate by filling out Concordia University's informed consent form. As a part of this process, participants agreed to the recording of their answers, which have been anonymized for the purposes of the study. Participants were compensated CAD\$20 for the completion of the full study.

Instruments

The data-collection instruments utilized for this study were as follows: 1) an autonomous language learner recruitment questionnaire (Appendix B), 2) a semi-structured interview (Appendix C), and 3) videos provided by participants exhibiting their gameplay and interactions in the MMORPG context. The questionnaire was administered through Concordia University's license to Qualtrics XM, at the request from the Reddit moderation team. It gathered information about the adult participants, including their native languages, perceived L2 English proficiency, and instances of study or travel abroad. The questionnaire also assessed their self-confidence in English and their non-academic, non-professional English engagement. Additionally, it verified participants' willingness to take part in a 45-minute online interview, where they would discuss their learning journey online. Lastly, the questionnaire requested links to any publicly uploaded YouTube or Twitch media that documented their engagement with others in the MMORPG(s) they play. This type of "video logging" is common amongst MMO players, as they use it to track their progress, or to review recordings to find how to advance further into the game's content.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through social media postings to Reddit and Discord (Appendix A). To be included, participants were invited to fill out a recruitment survey (Appendix B) to verify their eligibility as autonomous language learners who have achieved an advanced level of proficiency in English from their experiences in MMORPG communities. After connecting with eligible participants via the Discord App or email, they were provided with a consent letter to participate in the study, along with a scheduled meeting to explain the letter's contents. Participants were informed that they were able to ask questions about the letter and the study at any time, as well as terminate their participation at

any time. All participants were given codes (e.g., “P1,” “P6”) which replaced any identifying information (e.g. names) in order to preserve their anonymity.

Once the letter was signed and returned to the researcher via email, participants and researcher scheduled a time to hold a 45–60-minute-long semi-structured interview (Appendix C). During the interview, participants were asked about their experiences learning English autonomously in an MMORPG environment and their self-perception within both the in-game community and related external platforms such as Discord and Twitch chats. The interview was also audio recorded for further data analysis.

At the participants’ earliest convenience, either before the interview, or within 2 weeks following it, they were asked to provide links to previously uploaded public YouTube videos or Twitch Videos on Demand (VODS) which display them interacting with peers in or around online games. The number of participants able to provide this optional information was not high enough to draw notable conclusions from the data provided because the submitted content varied greatly in play style and game genre.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participant recruitment was conducted using Qualtrics XM while further data exchange and interviews were conducted online in English in text (for emails, links, and scheduling) or in a voice call through the Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) social platforms Discord and Google Meet.

Interview data from six participants was transcribed and analyzed to be thematically coded for instances of self-regulation strategies in language learning environments, following the framework of Tseng et al. (2006). Self-reported incidents in interviews were coded for themes in language learning strategies regarding word meaning, retrieval, and negotiation of meaning in digital contexts. Participant interview data was further analyzed based on the Critical Discourse Analysis approach employed by Rosas and Dhen (2012) to analyze World

of Warcraft players. In this study, however, the approach was modified to position the participants as members of both their digital wild communities and the broader non-native English-speaking community, considering how this dual membership might impact their interactions, socialization practices, and language learning strategies. This allowed for themes to emerge between the individual (e.g., note-keeping, gamified vocabulary acquisition), and social strategies (e.g., peer-supported learning, debate as a vehicle for learning). Thus, these themes can be organized under the umbrellas of “learning by oneself,” and “learning with others.” Critical analysis of this crossover is intended to give insight into answering the second research question, while accounting for the participants’ dual memberships as members of their in-game and digital communities, but also in the multilingual, non-native English population. This duality was integral in the interpretation of learners’ navigation of group norms, constructed linguistic identities, and responses to community standards of tolerance, inclusion, and performance (linguistically and in gameplay).

This critical lens was vital in addressing Research Question 2, regarding the relationship between language learning strategies and online identity formation. Themes emerging from self-insert avatar creation, support role preferences, selective error tolerance, and preliminary (or sometimes consistent) avoidance of voice chat revealed the ways in which identity intersected with language use and regulation. Additionally, cross-platform immersion through Reddit or Discord communities created an expanded environment for interaction and learning, demonstrating how players shaped their identities via text-based interaction and strategic information seeking.

These multi-layered analyses of strategy themes and identity discourse address both research questions. The typology of learning strategies address research question 1, which asks about the predominant learning strategies employed by successful autonomous language learners in the digital wilds, particularly in their experiences in MMORPGs. Research

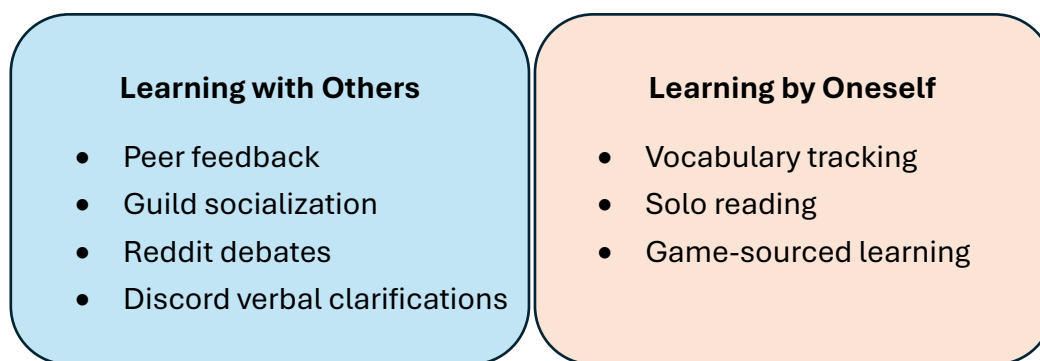
question 2 is explored and addressed through how the strategies described align with the players' roles, motivations, and projected identities within their game communities.

Results

Overall, thematic analysis reveals that MMORPGs serve as immersive environments that provide agency for second language development. In this study, participants demonstrated a variety of self-regulated learning strategies, developed organically through their engagement with game user interfaces and mechanics, as well as through social interactions both in-game and on platforms such as Reddit and Discord. The strategies employed by participants were neither taught nor externally imposed, but occurred organically through player motivation to understand, participate, and progress in digital multilingual contexts. These are summarised briefly in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Learning Strategy Types



This study investigated the strategies of autonomous language learners in the digital wilds and used Critical Discourse Analysis to examine identity negotiation in those spaces. Using participant answers to interview questions, a theme-by-participant summary table (Figure 2) was constructed by synthesizing responses and identifying key patterns present across at least 3 of 6 participants. These themes, grounded in responses to all eight interview questions (Appendix C) and further generated discussion, offer a comparative lens on how individual learners navigated MMORPGs as autonomous English learners.

Figure 2*Theme-by-Participant Summary Table (Participants 1-6)*

Theme/Code	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Informal practice	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Peer-assisted Language Learning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Avatar-as-Self-Mix	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Avatar Language Flexibility	✓	✓			✓	✓
Preference for Support Roles		✓	✓		✓	✓
Supportive but Selective Tolerance of Strangers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Communication Strategy shift by Context	✓	✓		✓		✓
Perceived Decreased Tolerance of Learners by Other Players Over Time	✓			✓		✓
Awareness of Cultural Code Switching	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Preference for Text-Based-Identity			✓	✓	✓	
Digital Immersion Includes Reddit & Discord	✓	✓		✓	✓	
English as Default Avatar Language		✓		✓	✓	✓
Mood-Dependent Communication			✓	✓	✓	✓
Guild Detachment / Time Zone Isolation		✓			✓	✓
Perceived Group Identity	✓		✓	✓		✓
Unique Contribution to Group	✓		✓		✓	✓
Aural Input Struggles				✓	✓	✓
Argument-Based Strategic Practice				✓	✓	✓
Social Sites as Training Grounds				✓	✓	✓
Avoidance of Traditional Learning Spaces	✓		✓		✓	✓
Visual Learning from Game UI and Metrics		✓		✓	✓	

Addressing research question 1, participants used both self-motivated and socially supported language learning strategies. All six participants reported informal exposure through reading in-game content. Chatting with others online was also unanimously reported

amongst participants. Listening was employed by learners after they had established some preliminary connections in their environments and found themselves in game situations that demanded more cooperation or interaction than entry-level content. Peer interaction was particularly influential, with all six participants reporting that feedback or clarification from either more experienced players or more fluent speakers aided them in the earlier stages of their learning journey, continuing to support them in learning new concepts, slang, or resolving misunderstandings. Multiple participants additionally described learning through guild interaction, Reddit discourse, and multilingual server play, such as joining a region's game server to prepare for language exams in its dominant language.

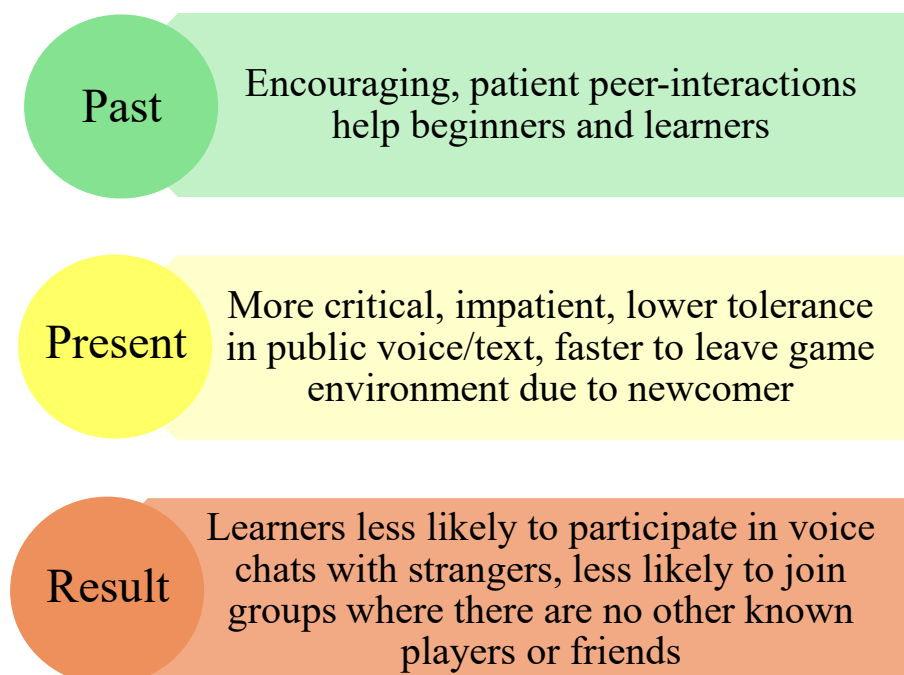
Research question 2 examined how these strategies intersected with identity. All participants expressed that they presented themselves to the game world through avatar design, role preference (e.g., healer, tank, or damage-dealer), or communication style. It is worth noting that the method of self-insert was not consistent across players. Some felt that the avatar appearance should look closely like their real selves, while others created idealized selves or fictionalized characters for added interest. Most participants said that, when asked, they would consider their avatars in the game universe to primarily speak English, though some might change their dominant language depending on the context. This manifested either in a fantasy fashion, of speaking common and elvish for example, or based on real-world game servers where some may be dominated by English and others by another language.

It is worth noting that one participant explicitly stated they put no value into how their characters appear or behave in the game because they are legally blind in real life. Instead, they put thought into the role their character plays for accommodation purposes, but also for in-game contextual plausibility. As a blind player outside of the game, and for any self-insert within a fantasy setting, it is difficult to plausibly imagine someone who is legally blind standing at the forefront of a battle or taking on the responsibility of tending the wounded

players in the midst of an intense fight. Thus, choosing to play in a damage-dealing role, like an archer, allows for not only smoother gameplay but a more gratifying self-insert experience, while also relieving the player of the aforementioned responsibilities.

Apart from this exceptional case, many other participants admitted that their first, or main roles in games were support-based. Behind-the-scenes contribution was a common report, suggesting that identity work is centered around the reliability, helpfulness, and quiet leadership they could provide. Most (5/6) participants preferred text-based communication over voice, indicating an emphasis on control and clarity, as well as protection from accent-based bias or communication breakdowns. Text-based formats allowed for more thoughtful exchanges and for unknown terminology to be checked in a dictionary or translation tool if necessary. In some cases, participants reported purposefully seeking arguments in-game or on Reddit as a means of improving their English, because they found that this type of social interaction was stripped of any polite couching that might prevent collocutors from correcting them. This practice coincided closely with the practice of using social media sites to practice in general, but was not exclusive, as some social media usage was simply to gather information about how best to play the game, or to follow guides for effective gameplay strategies.

Some participants displayed an awareness of changing community tolerance for non-native English players. While older online spaces in the 2010's or earlier were seen as being more patient, half of the participants mentioned that current online environments, especially voice chats, were less forgiving of either grammatical error or pronunciation difficulties. This shift shaped how participants approached communication, as summarized in Figure 3. The participants reporting this awareness of change in the community indicated preferring text-based communication because of the lowered risk for backlash and lowered mental load associated with less-immediate communication contexts.

Figure 3*Perception of Social Tolerance of Learners*

All participants (6/6) agreed that they felt games either taught them or prepared them for practical English use better than formal education. In some instances, learners had taken English classes that they were failing or doing poorly in because the practical application was not apparent, yet they continued to develop their English capabilities through online communities with less friction.

From these analyses, we can see two avenues for constructing two preliminary archetypes to describe our participants and their identities while considering their learning strategies. First, we can see avatar design as self-projection. All participants chose something about their avatar's appearance or in-game story choices that reflected or resembled an aspect of themselves. This includes some who adapted language use and multilingualism to this internal identity. In this way, each avatar reflected aspects of the player's real-world identity, while also serving as a projection of how they wished to be perceived. This overlap between

digital and real-world identity forms a foundation for a language strategy alignment, where avatars both reflected the self and acted as roles to be inhabited.

Second, we can see that there were instances of identity-driven communication shifts. Participants who described dynamic shifts in how they communicated depending on their audience (*communication strategy shift by context* in *Figure 2* above) demonstrated a metacognitive awareness of the communication goals and identity management in digital communities, which allowed them to recognize their own communication practices and learning needs.

From these, two approaches to English learning through gameplay can be identified:

- 1) **Conscious strategists** (P1, P2, P6) who employed notetaking, debate, and vocabulary tracking, adjusting their tones and demeanors based on what the context demanded of them.
- 2) **Immersive learners** (P3, P4, P5) who were less self-aware of their metalinguistic choices but nevertheless absorbed the language incidentally through participation and socialization, sometimes engaging in debates because it “was fun” more so than because they believed it would make their English improve.

There is a disconnect between these two archetypes and responses to community support in identity development through guilds and shared identity within them. All participants stated they enjoyed their in-game friend groups, but that social detachment from guilds did arise if there was too much difference in time-zones or cultural practices (P2, P5, P6). Generally, however, this was an experience in the past that had been remedied through purposeful shifting of social groups, rather than an ongoing issue.

Discussion

This study’s goal was to explore the learning strategies and identity practices of autonomous English learners embedded within MMORPG communities. Specifically, it

investigated how these learners navigate the digital wilds to develop their English skills. To explore this inquiry, two research questions were devised, focusing on trends in learning strategies found across the participant group, as well as trends in personality and behaviour. This section discusses the findings in relation to these questions, situating the participants' reported strategies and identity practices within existing scholarship. It also highlights the implications for language learning in the digital wilds, particularly in how MMORPGs function as sites of both linguistic and identity development.

Predominant Learning Strategies Employed by Successful Autonomous L2 Learners

The findings from this study indicate that autonomous learners employed a blend of self-regulated and socially mediated strategies to teach themselves and improve their English. This aligns with Tseng, Dörnyei, and Schmitt's (2006) and their framework of self-regulated learning strategies, where learners actively manage their own motivation, engagement, self-monitoring, and reflection. Informal learning via reading and listening was common, while some participants pursued deliberate interventions through arguments with others online. In all cases, there was an absence of formal structuring or academic assignments determining learning paths. Peer collaboration, guild mentorship, and multicultural server navigation emerged as recurring methods of enhancing input and output quality. These findings echo Peterson's (2012) and Rama et al.'s (2012) descriptions of MMOs as socially rich environments where scaffolding occurs through spontaneous interaction, shared goals, and the necessity to cooperate in gameplay progression. The findings indicate that collaboration, guidance, and intercultural communication drive both linguistic and identity development.

Taken together, these strategies reflect high levels of engagement and self-awareness about personal language needs and community dynamics. Participants often balanced individual autonomy with socially scaffolded opportunities, aligning with Godwin-Jones's (2019) conceptualization of "situated autonomy," which is autonomy that is embedded in

ongoing social participation and identity formation. (see Learning Strategy Types in Figure 1).

Interaction of Learning Strategies and Identity in Autonomous Language Learning

Players' identities significantly shaped their applied strategies and approaches. This finding is in agreement with Gee's (2003, 2004) concept of projective identity, where learners negotiate between their real selves, their in-game avatars, and the identities they aspire to inhabit. The participants who viewed their avatars as extensions of themselves often preferred supportive roles, which reinforced a supportive identity both linguistically and socially, with less pressure to initiate and carry leadership roles in both the game and in a conversational sense.

Participants wary of voice-based communication leaned on text platforms to control their linguistic presentation and tailor it if necessary. This choice reflects what Peterson (2012) describes as the benefits of anonymity and reduced embarrassment in online interactions, which can create a safer space for L2 learners to experiment with language. This is also consistent with the findings of Shafirova and Cassany (2019), who showed how participants' affiliation with a community of interest influenced their willingness to communicate and the strategies they employed to accomplish it. In the case of this study, identity not only influenced role preference, but also determined comfort with correction, tolerance for peer errors, and willingness to engage across cultures to negotiate meanings and form relationships. This supports Sauro and Zourou's (2019) characterization of the digital wilds as spaces where learners actively shape their linguistic and social engagement according to community norms and the alignment of their identities with these norms.

The dual identity as gamer and L2 learner is foundational to strategy development, supporting Godwin-Jones's (2019) proposal that autonomy in digital wilds is situated in social participation and identity work. This is further reinforced by Ryu (2013), who

emphasized the inextricability of language development from cultural and identity practices within gaming. Within this positioning, two preliminary conceptual archetypes emerged: (1) the “Conscious strategists,” who deliberately employed notetaking, or sought peer feedback on their language use and development and (2) the “immersive learners,” who relied more on community participation and incidental acquisition. These learner types could be seen as manifestations of what Li et al. (2022) describe as a type of activity-mediated identity work, where tools, roles, and norms co-construct learners’ trajectories and success in digital environments.

Implications

These findings reinforce the value of MMORPGs and similar spaces in the digital wilds as meaningful spaces for second language learning. Educators should view these non-academic digital spaces as rich linguistic arenas rife with opportunities for learners to practice communication, negotiation, and identity work in real time. Learners who may feel disconnected or distracted in traditional classrooms can find motivation and flexibility in this form of self-directed engagement. Language programs and schools can support this by encouraging reflective engagement with digital play via journaling, peer discussion, analysis of in-game language use, or formations of student clubs or peer groups that play together.

From a research and pedagogical standpoint, attending to how learners perform and negotiate their identities in the digital wilds provides a crucial lens into language development that occurs beyond the classroom. The flexibility given by avatar-based interactions, the dynamics of online communities, and the translingual nature of the digital wilds all contribute to shaping learner motivation, autonomy, and self-confidence. Understanding these factors will allow educators to better support diverse learner trajectories and redefine what counts as valuable language practice.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study is limited by its small sample size (six participants) which, while rich in depth, may certainly miss the full diversity of MMORPG learners globally. Additionally, most participants had long histories of gaming and digital communication, especially having been on the internet for well over a decade, sometimes in English for that entire time. This distance from the recency of their learning experiences may have impacted their ability to accurately remember and describe their methods for language learning, especially any pitfalls or difficulties.

Future research could include a broader range of language proficiencies and platform preferences. An additional line of inquiry could be in voice-chat-only spaces, or spaces intended explicitly to socialize like VRChat or Second Life, where role-play and self-insertion are more necessary than MMORPGs with avatars that follow a predetermined story path. Additionally, future studies could investigate more than just English learners. Other forms of digital wild interaction (via streaming platforms, or fanfiction communities) also provide further opportunities to investigate language learning in hobby spaces and the motivations and trends therein. Finally, sociological study of changing community dynamics and tolerance towards new players, language learners, or combinations of these groups may indicate shifts in public perceptions, which may impact learner identity construction and motivation in future generations.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay between strategy use and player identity in the language learning practices of autonomous learners in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. The findings suggest that these successful learners in the digital wilds are not only self-regulated, but also deeply attuned to the social, cultural, and communicative landscapes of their gaming communities, or otherwise motivated deeply to contribute to and

participate in them. Their learning strategies are shaped by both personal goals and the identities they construct and inhabit in-game.

While the small sample size limits the generalizability of this study, the depth of insight underscores the value of examining language learning in context-rich, user-driven environments that have an absence of academic meddling. As digital spaces continue to evolve, so too will the forms of autonomy and identity negotiation that construct language learning in the same spaces. Further research from across diverse platforms, disciplines, and learner profiles will be essential to fully understand and support language development in the digital wilds.

Chapter 3

Concluding Remarks

Overview of Thesis

This chapter synthesizes the main findings that emerge from the analysis of six participant interviews, drawing from both thematic coding and critical discourse analysis, with a focus on how language-learning strategies and identity formation intersect in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) environments. The goal of this study was to examine how successful autonomous learners in these environments engage with language learning informally and socially, while also constructing and negotiating their identities through avatar design, communication style, and community participation. The results point to MMORPGs as fertile ground for some learners' second language development, occurring naturally through gameplay and social interaction, and self-directed exploration. These spaces foster not only language acquisition opportunities, but identity negotiation, where learners are provided opportunities to perform and experiment with their in-game self and real-world self, while gradually acquiring multilingual status that may shift both identities (Rosas & Dhen, 2012; Shahrokni, 2021).

Importantly, MMORPGs present themselves as learning grounds absent of intentional formal learning affordances (Sauro & Zourou, 2019), necessitating learners who want for structure of that nature to organize or create their own forms of feedback and assessment independently (Mutlu & Eröz Tuğa, 2013). Learners navigate a wide range of interactions, guild chat, dungeon coordination, roleplay, and cross-cultural exchanges, all of which require a varied level of linguistic dexterity and social competence to participate in without any awkwardness or disappointments (Peterson, 2012; Newgarden & Zheng, 2016). In learning to do this and leveraging skills the learners may already have from their L1 to scaffold their L2 interactive skill set, they achieve active roles in their own development: managing their goals,

regulating their performance, and evaluating the outcomes of their strategies in real time via how they feel as they come away from social interaction. This parallels the findings of Lee, Watson, and Watson (2020) regarding autonomous language learners, as well as aligning with the strategies noted by Tseng, Dörnyei, and Schmitt (2016).

This chapter further explores how learner identity mediates access to opportunities, shapes preferred strategies and influences emotional responses to correction and feedback from others. MMORPGs and their associated communities are not neutral spaces. They are highly social, driven by constantly changing social norms which demand learners to interpret and respond to social cues, both in language and behavior, to emerge successful in their interactions (Rosas & Dhen, 2012). Finally, the chapter outlines how these findings can inform language pedagogy and future research, especially as learner needs are changing in our ever-evolving digital ecologies.

Summary of Main Findings

The findings of this study directly address the two research questions, shedding light on how autonomous learners develop language skills (RQ1) and negotiate identity in informal digital environments (RQ2). Together, these insights can deepen our understanding of the intricate interplay between language learning strategies and player identity in MMORPG spaces, revealing the deep and socially embedded nature of language acquisition amongst autonomous learners in these spaces (Godwin-Jones, 2019; Sundqvist, 2015).

The first major finding of this study is that MMOs provide for a wide range of learning strategies, both self-regulated and socially mediated. Participants reported engaging in extensive reading and listening activities, generally without conscious intention to learn, but rather just to understand (Sundqvist, 2015, 2019). Some learners mention vocabulary tracking or grammar-focused interaction at earlier stages of their language acquisition, but by advanced stages of acquisition, all that remains generally is occasional translation or word

lookup. Many players additionally utilized the full breadth of the digital wilds outside the games themselves to scaffold understanding of game content and expectations. This involves using YouTube guides, wikis, or social community resources to ask questions (Sauro, 2017). These strategies reflect a spectrum of learner autonomy that spans from incidental acquisition to a highly structured self-guided study (Lee, 2019; Tseng et al., 2016). Each learner may exhibit behavior that ranges across this spectrum depending on the progress of language acquisition and their needs to understand the community they are in (e.g., if they are new to a given game community, or have remained in the same one for a long time).

Second, player identity seems to influence how learners approach language development and L2 interactions. Some participants embraced roles that mirrored personal traits (e.g., supportive or observant), while others reported choosing to experiment with personas that combined their real selves with a new idealized or re-imagined self (Rosas & Dhen, 2012; Shahrokni, 2021). Communication preferences aligned with these identity choices. Participants who remarked that voice-based communication was more difficult preferred the versatility provided by text-based chat, which allowed them to reflect on language use and craft appropriate responses. This identity-strategy link suggests that language learning in this way is not just a task to get from point A beginner to point B master, but also a social performance shaped by community expectations and social interaction (Gee, 2004; Ryu, 2013).

Following this is a third finding, namely that sociocultural dynamics of MMORPG communities directly affect how learners engage. Participants highlighted supportive environments with friends and other known players as well as negative and hostile environments that can arise in interactions with strangers, in line with Banks and Martey's (2018) analysis of MMORPG player's heightened perception of environment shifts around them. Notably, those who mentioned it remarked that this increase in hostility is what they

see as a shift from an older, more positive internet social structure of the past. These changes have directly impacted on their willingness to communicate or put effort into polite exchange. Similar to the findings of Shafirova and Cassany (2019) regarding interaction in online fandom, those learners who felt welcomed reported increased participation and linguistic risk-taking, (e.g., finding the right community allowed for making more language mistakes and asking for corrections without feeling shame. Conversely, any mockery, exclusion, or criticism for slow learning led learners to adopt more passive roles, reducing their involvement and prompting them to avoid high-stakes communication in raids or guild leadership positions.

Finally, learners demonstrated agency in bridging their learning across the multiple games they played and the social networks around them (Discord, Reddit, Twitch, and more). These platforms were used for reflection, clarification, social bonding, and additional language practice and informal tutoring. This mobility between platforms shows that these successful autonomous learners are not confined to only in-game experiences but rather construct their own learning ecosystems from a multitude of sources. These ecosystems support strategy reinforcement, provide community and belonging, and sustain motivation across time and local contexts (Godwin-Jones, 2019).

The convergence of in-game practices and external discursive participation (Reddit, Discord) shows how MMORPGs foster not just language use, but language ownership. Through active, self-directed participation, learners built their confidence, developed fluency, and shaped digital identities reflecting and reinforcing their linguistic growth. MMORPGs thus represent rich, multimodal ecologies of practice where L2 development becomes deeply social, performative, and identity driven, echoing Gee's (2003) notion of projective identity and Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice.

Implications for L2 Education and Research

These findings have several implications for language educators and curriculum designers. First, MMORPGs and similar digital environments should be recognized as legitimate sites of language learning, with authentic, immersive communicative challenges, diverse interlocutors, and meaningful feedback loops (Rama, Black, van Es, & Warschauer, 2012). Rather than dismissing games as distractions or only worthy of time if they are specifically created for language instruction, educators should guide learners in utilizing these attractive entertainment environments intentionally. There are many pedagogical approaches to scaffold and evaluate students' performance in these settings, including reflective journaling, analysis of game dialogue like literature analysis, introspection of dialogue with peers, and collaborative tasks that link in-game language with classroom content spanning across the offerings of the digital wilds (Sundqvist, 2015).

Additionally, it is imperative that MMORPGs and gaming at large not be viewed as peripheral, but rather pedagogically rich, particularly for learners who already do not thrive in traditional classroom settings. These spaces promote agency, curiosity, and resilience, which are traits less commonly rewarded by exam-based instruction. Educators can design curricula that incorporate the digital wilds and learner interests that exist outside of traditional language learning materials. This can be from class-wide participation in a game of interest, analysis of digital media, or metalinguistic discussions of how the digital wilds can motivate and positively influence their relationship with their L2.

From a research perspective, this study explored the importance of examining identity and power as central dimensions to language learning outside of classrooms through internet media spaces. Language use in multilingual and multicultural spaces like MMORPGs is deeply social and communicatively valuable in ways that textbook teaching methods struggle to emulate because of the ever-changing nature of native communication patterns, slang, and

information exchange in leisure spaces, especially online. Just as real-world ethnicity, disfigurement and perceived class can affect linguistic interactions face-to-face, customizable MMORPG avatars as stand-ins for learners give them autonomy to influence their interactions with others, often with greater mobility than they might have in real life. For example, avatar race, role, clothing, and guild membership may all affect perceptions that others have of the learner, but these are generally flexible attributes that learners can modify if they negatively affect interactions with others. Understanding how learners perceive themselves and are perceived by others in these communities is vital to understanding also their motivation, persistence, and long-term success.

Future Development

Looking ahead, one exciting direction for development is longitudinal research that can track this process of successful language learning. Longitudinal research that follows autonomous learners in this way would largely need to be learner-provided via journaling or video uploads, which may become increasingly likely as more people upload larger portions of their daily lives to the internet. Analysis of how learners' roles, strategies, and attitudes evolve through phases of gameplay, gameplay integration, and linguistic competence is also of interest. Such studies could yield valuable insights into the sustainability of informal learning and the potential for MMORPGs to support lifelong language development in certain demographics. Future studies should also explore the use of Van Dijk's (2016) Critical Discourse Analysis more widely to better capture the implicit power structures that shape who get to speak in these spaces, who gets corrected, and who is positioned as an expert or outsider, especially in language learning spaces that lack the central authority present in formal institutions.

Finally, as the myriads of digital ecologies shift and new games and social media platforms emerge, research must remain responsive to changing learner needs. Future studies

may explore VR-dominated spaces, learners who learn predominantly in voice chats over text chats, and other deeper explorations into marginalized learners in digital spaces like those with disabilities.

References

- Banks, J., & Martey, R. M. (2018). Coping with [r]evolution in online games: Vulnerability and resilience responses to change in MMO game expansions. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 62(2), 269–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2018.1451852>
- Bekleyen, N., & Selimoglu, F. (2016). Learner Behaviors and Perceptions of Autonomous Language Learning. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*. 20(3), 1-20.
- Brevik, L. (2016). The Gaming Outliers: Does out-of-school gaming improve boys' reading skills in English as a second language? In E. Elstad (Ed.), *Educational Technology and Polycontextual Bridging*. (1st ed., pp. 39-61). Sense Publishers.
- Du, F. (2013). Student perspectives of self-directed language learning: Implications for teaching and research. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2013.070224>
- García Botero, G., & Questier, F. (2016). What students think and what they actually do in a mobile assisted language learning context: New insights for self-directed language learning in higher education. In P-S. Salomi, B. Linda, & T. Sylvie (Eds.), *CALL Communities and Culture – Short Papers from EUROCALL 2016*, 150–154. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.eurocall2016.553>
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2019). Riding the digital wilds: Learner autonomy and informal language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 23(1), 8–25. <https://doi.org/10.125/44667>

Hannibal Jensen, S. (2019). Language learning in the wild: A young user perspective.

Language Learning & Technology, 23(1), 72–86. <https://doi.org/10.125/44673>

Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual ethnography*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857020277>

Krzyżanowski, M. (2011). Ethnography and critical discourse analysis: towards a problem-oriented research dialogue. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 8(4), 231–238.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2011.601630>

Laufer, B., & Hulstijn, J. (2001). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement. *Applied Linguistics*, 22(1), 1–26.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/22.1.1>

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*.

Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355>

Li, K., Peterson, M., & Wang, Q. (2022) Out-of-school language learning through digital gaming: a case study from an activity theory perspective, *Computer Assisted*

Language Learning, 1-29. [10.1080/09588221.2022.2067181](https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2022.2067181)

Lee, D., Watson, S. L., & Watson, W. R. (2020). The relationships between self-efficacy, task value, and self-regulated learning strategies in Massive open online courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 21(1), 23–39.

<https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i5.4389>

Lee, J. S. (2019). Quantity and diversity of informal digital learning of English. *Language Learning & Technology*, 23(1), 114–126. <https://doi.org/10.125/44675>

Mutlu, A. & Eröz Tuğa, B. (2013). The Role of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in Promoting Learner Autonomy. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*. 51(1). 107-122.

- Newgarden, K., & Zheng, D. (2016). Recurrent languaging activities in World of Warcraft: Skilled linguistic action meets the Common European Framework of Reference. *ReCALL*, 28(3), 274–304. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344016000112>
- Peterson, M. (2012). Learner interaction in a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG): A sociocultural discourse analysis. *ReCALL*, 24(3), 361–380. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344012000195>
- Rama, P. S., Black, R. W., van Es, E., & Warschauer, M. (2012). Affordances for second language learning in World of Warcraft. *ReCALL*, 24(3), 322–338. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344012000171>
- Rosas, O., & Dhen, G. (2012). One Self to Rule Them All: A Critical Discourse Analysis of French Speaking Players' Identity Construction in World of Warcraft. In N. Zagalo, L. Morgado, & A. Boa-Ventura (Eds.), *Virtual worlds and metaverse platforms: New Communication and Identity Paradigms* (pp. 337–366). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-60960-854-5>
- Ryu, D. (2013). Play to Learn, Learn to Play: Language Learning through Gaming Culture. *ReCALL*, 25(2), 286–301. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344013000050>
- Sauro, S. (2017). Online fan practices and CALL. *CALICO Journal*, 34(2), 131–146.
- Sauro, S., & Zourou, K. (2019). What are the digital wilds? *Language Learning & Technology*, 23(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.125/44666>
- Shafirova, L., & Cassany, D. (2019). Bronies learning English in the digital wild. *Language Learning & Technology*, 23(1), 127–144. <https://doi.org/10.125/44676>
- Shahrokni, S. A. (2021). On the internet: Evidence for second language socialization in multiplayer online game play. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 24(4), 1–44. <https://tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej96/int.pdf>

Sundqvist, P. (2013). The SSI Model: Categorization of digital games in EFL studies.

European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL, 2(1), 89–104.

Sundqvist, P. (2015). About a boy: A gamer and L2 English speaker coming into being by use of self-access. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 6(4), 352–364.

Sundqvist, P. (2019). Commercial-off-the-shelf games in the digital wild and L2 learner vocabulary. *Language Learning & Technology*, 23(1), 87–113.

<https://doi.org/10.125/44674>

Sylvén, L. K., & Sundqvist, P. (2012). Gaming as extramural English L2 learning and L2 proficiency among young learners. *ReCALL*, 24(3), 302–321.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S095834401200016X>

Tseng, W.-T., Dornyei, Z., Schmitt, N. (2006). A new approach to assessing strategic learning: the case of self-regulation in vocabulary acquisition. *Applied Linguistics*, 27(1), 78–102.

Van Dijk, T. (2001). Multidisciplinary CDA: A plea for diversity. In Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.), *Methods in critical discourse analysis*, (pp. 95–120). Sage Publications.

Van Dijk, T. (2016). Critical discourse studies: A sociocognitive approach. In Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. (pp. 63–85). Sage Publications.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.

Appendix A

Social Media Recruitment Message (Sample)

Are you a non-native English speaker who learned English while playing MMOs? Research Participants Wanted!

Hi everyone, my name is Dana Kirkpatrick, and I am an Applied Linguistics M.A. candidate from the Department of Education at Concordia University, working under the supervision of Dr. Walcir Cardoso. The goal of this study is to investigate the learning strategies of language learners in the “digital wilds” (like MMORPGs and their online communities), as well as to describe the profile of successful learners in this context.

This research is approved by Concordia University’s Ethics Board under the **Certification of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Human Subjects**

I am searching for non-native English speakers who have learned English while engaging with MMORPG communities in-game or online.

If you are interested, please contact me by email so that I can send you a short survey. If you are eligible to participate, we will meet over Discord, Skype, or Zoom so that I can provide you with a letter of consent, explain that letter, and answer any questions you have about the study. If you do agree to participate, you will have to sign and return the letter of consent to me by email. For the study, in a one-time session via your preferred video or voice conferencing application, you will be invited to interview and answer questions regarding your experiences in learning English in an MMORPG community. This interview should take approximately 45 minutes. At your earliest convenience, you will also be asked to provide one or more links to your public Twitch or YouTube content which shows you interacting in the MMORPG in some way (e.g. socializing, questing, levelling, raiding). All aspects of the study will be conducted remotely (via Discord, Skype or email), and the interviews will be audio recorded. I will record the audio of the interview for further data analysis; however, neither your face nor your name will appear on the recording or be published. You will remain fully anonymous for this study.

If you are selected, **you will be compensated CAD\$20 for your participation.**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you would like to participate, or if you have any questions about the study, please contact me at dana.kirkpatrick@mail.concordia.ca

Appendix B

Purposeful Criterion Sampling (eligibility) Survey

These questions were answered on a Qualtrics XM form sent via email and some of the items were provided in drop-down menus. Participants were reminded on the page that their participation would be completely anonymous and was highly appreciated. They were informed that they may answer all questions, or only the ones they felt comfortable with.

1. What do you consider your native language(s)?

2. What other languages do you know or speak?

3. How confident do you feel in your English reading/writing skills?

(Not confident) 1 2 3 4 5 (Very confident)

4. How confident do you feel in your English speaking/listening skills?

(Not confident) 1 2 3 4 5 (Very confident)

5. How often do you travel abroad?

(I've never left my country) 1 2 3 4 5 (Many times per year)

6. If you have travelled abroad, how often do you use English?

(Never) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

7. Have you ever learned any languages on your own? Yes / No / Prefer not to say.

a. If yes, which one(s)?

b. If yes, what tools/books/websites/games did you use to learn?

8. Of the following categories, which do you do in English in your spare time? (Select all that apply)

[1] Reading books/comics [2] Reading newspapers/magazines [3] Watching TV [4] Watching films [5] Using the internet (e.g. social media, Reddit, YouTube, Twitch) [6] Playing digital games [7] Listening to music [8] Other: (Comment)

9. On average in the past 6 months, how many hours each day did you spend engaging with the activities you selected?

 [] (Blank numeric boxes provided per category.)

10. Out of 100%, what percentage of your learning of English has come from formal instruction (e.g., school), and what percentage has come from online activities (e.g., internet, watching English videos/streams, gaming, other media)?

 [] (Blank numeric box provided.)

11. Are you able to participate in a 45–60-minute interview over Discord or Skype in the upcoming weeks? Yes / No

a. If yes, please provide your discord username and your email so the researchers can contact you.

If yes, are you able to provide any links to Twitch VODs or YouTube uploads of your interactions with others while playing MMORPGs (Raiding, questing, socializing, etc.)
Yes / No / Prefer not to Answer

Appendix C

Guideline to Semi-structured Interview Questions

The following questions were asked in English. The researcher would reference them during the interview process but simplify or re-iterate on them as necessary to accommodate to the participants' comprehension needs. They were designed to explore the intersection of player identity, social interactions within MMORPG guilds (social groups of players), and the strategies employed by autonomous learners to acquire English proficiency in digital environments. The goal in the question design was to be able to build out archetypes of player identity and match them with responses to English learning motivators and how (with what strategies) they were met.

1. Can you describe your in-game avatar and how you chose its attributes?

- *(This question explored the player's avatar selection process and its narrative aspects, revealing any identity projections and motivations behind avatar creation.)*

2. In what ways does your avatar reflect aspects of yourself, including dialogue choice?

- *(This question aimed to uncover whether the avatar is seen as a direct extension of the player's real self, an idealized representation, or a mix of both, thereby exploring the psychological aspects of player-avatar identity.)*

2.1 What language do you think your avatar speaks? Does it depend on the situation?

3. How does your communication style differ when you engage in duties with strangers versus activities with your guild/raid members?

- *(Building on the avatar question, this explored motivations, roles, and interactions in different game contexts, shedding light on how communication methods influence gameplay strategies or linguistic exchange.)*

4. When you do activities with your guild/staticmates, do you feel like you have a shared sense of identity? If so, what aspects contribute to this shared identity?

- *(This question delved into the social dynamics within guilds, examining how shared norms, values, and collective goals impact the player's experience and role within the game environment.)*

4.1. What do you uniquely contribute to your guild/static? What special qualities do you have?

5. Could you describe specific instances where your role or contributions influenced your communication style or strategies with your group?

- *(This question sought concrete examples of how guild/static identity translates into communication strategies and avenues, revealing the practical implications of collective identity in MMORPGs.)*

6. When faced with challenges in the game that require communication or problem-solving in English, how do you typically approach these situations?

- *(Focused on learning strategies, this question explored how players leverage in-game scenarios to enhance their English language skills, including communication, negotiation, and problem-solving.)*

7. Thinking of your experiences in MMORPGs and their communities (e.g. On Discord, Reddit, YouTube, Twitch, etc.), have you ever consciously tried to learn or improve your English language through your interactions? If yes, can you describe some specific methods or experiences?

- *(This question aimed to uncover deliberate learning strategies employed within the game environment, such as vocabulary acquisition, grammar practice, or cultural understanding through in-game interactions.)*

8. How have your experiences in MMORPG communities helped you learn English? How would you compare it to traditional language learning methods, like formal instruction?

- *(This comparative question sought to understand the perceived effectiveness and unique advantages of learning English through MMORPGs versus formal education, providing insights into the efficacy of autonomous learning strategies.)*