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Acquiring English Through The Game
World of Warcraft

Lärande av engelska genom spelet World of Warcraft

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Abstract

This study investigates the learning experiences of three L2 learners of English in connection to the massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. The participants, who all attend the course English A at upper secondary school at the time of the study, are frequent players of the game.

By writing journals, the participants were asked to report on their learning experiences in direct connection to playing the game. In addition to this they were also interviewed in order to gain a further understanding of their linguistic development through the game.

The research shows that the participants were very positive to the learning experiences attached to the game. They all had an abundance of examples to show for their linguistic skills improving significantly by playing the game. Especially the opportunity to engage in authentic dialogue with co-players in English reportedly greatly improved their linguistic skills. However, some doubts exist as to the teaching benefits of the game as most participants were negative to using the game in a setting of instructed learning.

**Key words:** *World of Warcraft, Monitor Model, MMORPG, Language acquisition*
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1. Introduction

Over the last decade or so, second language learners of English have seen a rapid increase in means of using and acquiring language skills through the use of different technologies. With an increase in social forums and networks over the internet as well as a rising online gaming culture with new methods of interaction between players, students of English now have a wider array of ways to encounter English than ever before. Students no longer only gain receptive skills through media such as television, film and music. They are now also triggered to produce different texts and engage in social interactions in order to solve problems or have conversations with native as well as non-native English users. Due to these new platforms, the basis of language learning is changing.

The forum where learners have the greatest chance of facing instruction- and task based interaction out of all these new forms of media today is, arguably, that of online games. So called Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) include a huge number of players who all have the possibility of interacting with each other in various forms. By playing games, with or against each other, enormous communities have become a frequent source of interaction among people. As Palmer (2010) states, “these communities are comprised of native speakers of various languages, and so introducing language students into these video game worlds can result in immersing students into a target language community” (p. 41). The currently most popular of these MMORPGs is undoubtedly World of Warcraft, in this paper referred to as WoW. In WoW, interactions between players are central and sometimes even necessary for solving puzzles and completing quests within the game. There is also the huge potential of meeting new people to have a conversation with in the target language.

As a teacher at an upper secondary school, I have met a lot of students who play WoW frequently, and it seems they all share the same belief about the language learning potential of the game. When using the different forms of communication present in the game, students engage in authentic interaction in English with people of different nationalities, cultural backgrounds and linguistic abilities. As opposed to the L2 classroom, students face actual problem solving situations where their language skills are essential. Whereas the typical
classroom rarely grants an opportunity to interact in the target language in truly authentic situations, games such as Wow do.

Because of the rise in importance of these new tools for interaction, more and more research is done on their implications and on how, if at all, schools should implement them in the L2 classroom. Much of this research draws upon the book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* by Gee (2003). However, as Palmer (2010) states, “MMOs could be ideal spaces for providing learners with a variety of social positionings /…/ as well as a wealth of authentic language experiences /…/ but due to the tender age of this emerging field, research into the potential for video games to enhance the learning of L2 pragmatics is almost nonexistent” (p. 9).

What these studies often miss out on when games are concerned is what the actual interactions that learners face look like and how learners relate to them (Thorne, Black & Sykes, 2009; Palmer, 2010). Studies often focus on the implementation of these technologies into the L2 classroom and on what consequences the games have on the learner in the classroom. Without looking at the interactions students actually have when playing these games and how they relate to them, it is possible that these studies might be inconclusive. Thus, I find it of importance to instead study the interactions students have and what they themselves have to say on their own language use in games such as Wow.

**1.1 Research questions**

In this degree paper, I have therefore focused on the communicative aspects of the game Wow. My study discusses the importance of the game to language acquisition with focus on some players who study English. The purpose of this study is therefore to examine the interactions that three L2 students of English who play Wow face in the game and how these students relate their language use within Wow to their language acquisition. Their responses will be discussed using the theories of Krashen’s Monitor Model.

The focus of the study will be on three students at two different upper secondary schools in Southern Sweden. The three students all attended the English A course at public schools at the time of the study and were 16 to 17 years old. The students all engage in the game *World of Warcraft* to varying degrees and have been asked to write a journal, documenting their
interactions when playing. Upon the journals, I have also interviewed them with focus on the interactive and communicative aspects of the game.

The research questions of this degree paper are therefore the following:

- How do the learners describe the interactions they have in the Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game *World of Warcraft*?
- How do the participants in this study relate these interactions to their own language acquisition?

1.2 Definitions

**Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game**

Massive Multiplayer Role Playing Games, known as MMORPGs, are games where a lot of players interact in an open world environment. These games should be distinguished from so-called Online Virtual Social Environments such as *Second Life* (Thorne et al. 2009). In an MMORPG, players create a character, giving it a name, race, gender and traits and place this character in an open world environment where they can interact with other players, much like in a Virtual Social Environment. However, in an MMORPG they advance these characters through gaining experience points. This can be done by partaking in quests alone or with other players with characters of different abilities and skills. The completion of a quest earns them experience points that are used for upgrading or buying new equipment for the character as well as increasing the skills and traits of the character. Most often, the overall goal of these games is to advance your character to the maximum experience level.

**World of Warcraft**

One of the most popular MMORPG of all time is undoubtedly *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). In this fantasy inspired game, the player may take on the role of an elf, orc or human and set out to solve quests. These quests are given to the character by so-called Non-Playable Characters (NPCs), or computer controlled characters. As Thorne et al. (2009) discusses, when the difficulty of the game play increases, “the inevitability of needing assistance from other players leads to the formation of casual dyadic partnerships and short-term ad hoc groups as well as long-term social organizations (i.e., guilds) that are dedicated to tightly choreographed multiparty game play” (p. 9). It is in these partnerships that the communicative nature of *WoW*
emerges. Since the game is mostly played in English, the players can be exposed to English interactions between users from all over the world.

Another notable factor present in *WoW* is the complex economic system and its impact on the game. Through achievements in battle, players obtain weapons, abilities, spells and skills that are all part of the world that has been built up inside the game. Some of these items are very desirable and reveal one of the main aspects of the game. As Palmer (2010) states:

“the most powerful gear in the game can only be obtained by defeating formidable monsters that can only be killed through the coordinated group effort of twenty-five alert players. This type of group coordination requires strong leadership and tight organization, which is best achieved through the formation of *guilds*, or groups of allied players who work together to accomplish team goals” (p. 72).

As a character is created in the game, the player gets to assign a class to that character. For example, they can be strong and resilient to attacks and thus serve better as shields, or be more adept at using ranged or close combat abilities. These classes thus open for a more tactical approach to the quests where communication between participants is essential.

### 1.3 Previous Research

Since Gee published his book titled *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, the discussions surrounding the learning implications of computer games have increased significantly. However, as previously stated, most studies do not focus on the actual learners’ own learning experiences with video games. In this section, some of the most relevant studies surrounding video game based learning will be discussed.

Gee (2003) discusses some of the learning principles existent in video games under the presumption that the positive effects of gaming are often discredited by society and overshadowed by the discussion surrounding the negative effects of exposure to violence that video games often lead to. Although he does not go into any depth in the potential benefits of learning a second language through playing games in the target language, he does discuss the importance of the language use in games to a certain extent. For example, the learning of vocabulary is increased through what Gee calls *The Situated Meaning Principle of Learning* (p. 224). Since “people really know what words mean only when they can hook them to the
sorts of experiences they refer to, that is, to the sorts of actions, images, or dialogues to which the words relate” (Gee, p. 218), games offer a learner not simply the definition of word used in a game, but also situated meaning to the word. The meaning of a word becomes apparent through the learners’ experiences connected to the word. The main impact that Gee’s book has had is that it has given rise to more research on the subject of games from a learning perspective.

In one of these studies, Barr, Noble & Biddle, (2006) look at human-computer interactions in video games. They conclude that the human-computer interactions in games differ from other computer software where these interactions are available, such as learning tools or productivity applications. An example of such a learning tool could be a computer program where students can order at a restaurant and get responses from the computer in a text based chat. Barr et al. (2006) argue that “games focus on the process of use (game play) rather than the results of that process” and that “the goals of games are usually defined and motivated within the game world, while the goals of productivity applications are generally defined outside the application, by the task” (p. 3). This means that video games hold different potential than that of other software. In other words, a learning application, designed to increase a student’s language skills, will be governed by a teacher and the goals of the application will be set by that teacher. In a video game, however, the goals will be set out by the game and the game will feature a reward system within itself offering the player instant gratification and further motivating the player to succeed; complete a task and you gain a point, fail and you have to try again. In light of this, it is important to note that while computer learning tools can be produced and used in schools with a great deal of success, they might not be as effective in stimulating authentic communication as computer games. Although the main focus in this study is on human-computer interactions, the same would most likely apply to human-human interactions in WoW.

In the article Second Language Use, Socialization, and Learning in Internet Interest Communities and Online Gaming, Thorne et al. (2009) discuss the uses of games and other online social forums for interaction from an educational point of view. They conclude that a game such as WoW “reveals extended periods of language socialization into sophisticated communicative practices and demonstrates the salience of creative expression and language use as tools for identity development and management” (Thorne et al., p. 802). Thus, these games place players within a collaborative problem solving context. Players must work
together and communicate with each other as well as with NPCs in order to achieve the goal of the game. Further, Thorne et. al. argue that although online communicative practices are often trivialized within instructed educational settings, i.e. the classroom, for the use of its stigmatized vernacular, they do “support the acquisition of linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and resources for performing relevant social identities” (Thorne et al., p. 814).

In *Time Will Tell: In-Game Social Interactions That Facilitate Second Language Acquisition*, Rankin, Morrison, McNeal, Gooch & Shute (2009) look at some interactions between ESL students and native speakers of English in *WoW* in order to draw some conclusions as to the effect of L2 learners’ language acquisition from the game. By asking the question “which characteristics of game dialogue promote [second language acquisition]” (Rankin et al., p. 163), the study investigates different dominant behaviors of players of diverse linguistic groups. One notable finding in their study on the language use is that ESL students often “demonstrate a ‘follow the leader’ mentality, asking more questions for clarification of quests and seeking guidance” (Rankin et al., p. 167). In accordance with this, native English speakers are found to “take on a leadership role, making suggestions for group action and instructing teammates on what to do next” (Rankin et al., p. 167). The level of proficiency in the language therefore has a direct impact on the game. It can therefore be implied by this that a high level of language proficiency is an important aim for non-native speakers as it grants more initiative within the game play. After a few gaming sessions it became apparent that non-native speakers seemed to gain more confidence and started having more conversations with native speakers that did not center on the actual game play (Rankin et al., p. 166).

Although the studies presented conclude that MMORPGs might be a valuable asset in second language acquisition, the question remains as to what interactions second language learners actually face. In her dissertation *Second Language Pragmatic Socialization in World of Warcraft*, Palmer (2010) explores the process of second language socialization in *WoW*. She does this by looking at the language practices and norms of the guild communities in which players partake, in this case learners of Spanish. The focus of her study is on language pragmatics, or on “how speakers use language in ways appropriate to various contexts” (Palmer, p. 8). In other words, her study focuses on how users of the game adapt their language to different discourses and situations within the game. Palmer’s study is one of the few that actually looks at the second language use in the game. She observes the game as a platform for learning a second language according to the theory of legitimate peripheral
participation (LPP). LPP “considers learning to be a part of social interaction and emphasizes the changes in communities of practice and the evolution of learners as they change from newcomers to masters and then begin to pass their knowledge on to fresh newcomers” (Palmer p. 54). She uses the theory of LPP to study how newcomers to the game observe and assess the practices of the more advanced participants and gradually become comfortable enough to use these practices themselves. While being immersed in the game herself, Palmer states that she is “a collaborator who could help develop strategies and be relied upon to help the group progress and improve” in the game (Palmer, p. 2).
2. Theoretical Framework

Before studying second language learning through the use of video games, it is important to discuss what second language learning is. When describing the processes involved in learning a new language, Krashen developed the theory of the *Monitor Model*. In this theory he developed five hypotheses, four of which have particular relevance to this study and will be presented here: the *acquisition learning hypothesis*, the *monitor hypothesis*, the *input hypothesis* and the *affective filter hypothesis* (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). These hypotheses serve as the main theoretical framework of this study as they are presented and discussed in relation to the results.

*Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis*

As a first hypothesis, a distinction may be made between language acquisition and learning. Ellis explains this distinction in the book *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, stating that *acquisition* “relates to the subconscious process of ‘picking up’ a language through exposure”, whereas *learning* relates to “the conscious process of studying it” (Lightbown & Spada, p 16). In language learning the focus lies on the form and rules of the language. Language learning is therefore typical for a classroom setting, whereas language acquisition is more similar to learning a first language as a child or by immersing oneself within the language community, although learning can naturally also take place outside school just as language acquisition can take place in the classroom. If any language skills are gained when a second language learner is playing video games that require communication between players, they would then rather be acquired than learned.

*Monitor Hypothesis*

Another hypothesis in the Monitor Model is the Monitor Hypothesis. Here, it is argued that the more a language is learnt, i.e the more conscious the learner is of the structure of the language and the more the learner is concerned about producing a correct sentence, the more the spontaneous language use will be obstructed (Lightbown & Spada, p. 36). When a learner is producing a text or a sentence the language passes through an imagined filter in the mind where the learner assesses the level of correctness of the sentence. If the learner is producing the language to be assessed by for example a teacher, the learner will be more anxious to get the sentence right. In a video game setting it would then be of importance to investigate whether video games offer an anxiety free setting or if it is of importance to the players to
produce a high level of language proficiency. If this hypothesis is compared to Rankin et. al.’s study of language proficiency within the game, this would mean that language proficiency is more desired when speaking to more proficient English speakers.

*Input Hypothesis*

The input hypothesis states that, for the learner to advance in the language, the level of the language that the learner faces must be at an appropriate level. According to the formula $i+1$, where $i$ represents the already acquired language and the +1 represents language that is just a step beyond that level, language acquisition occurs when a learner is faced with the most comprehensible input. Thus, it is important to study if the participants find the language they encounter in the game too complicated or too easy to improve in it (Lightbown & Spada p. 37).

*Affective Filter Hypothesis*

As a final hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis explains why some learners do not learn even though they are subjected to all the right circumstances. According to Krashen, this is because the affective filter gets in the way. The affective filter can be described as a “metaphorical barrier that prevents learners from acquiring language even when appropriate input is available” (Lightbown & Spada p. 37). When the emotional state, such as the feelings, motives or attitudes of the learner is down the affective filter will obstruct the input and impede on language acquisition.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of video games as tools for language acquisition is the engagement it offers its players. For example, Prensky (2001) argues that by motivating language learners to become immersed in communities with speakers of different native languages, video games offer an unprecedented level of engagement according to the following twelve principles:

Games are a form of **fun**. That gives us *enjoyment and pleasure*.
Games are a form of **play**. That gives us *intense and passionate involvement*.
Games have **rules**. That gives us *structure*.
Games have **goals**. That gives us *motivation*.
Games are **interactive**. That gives us *doing*.
Games have **outcomes and feedback**. That gives us *learning*.
Games are **adaptive**. That gives us *flow*.
Games have **win states**. That gives us *ego gratification*.
Games have **conflict/competition/challenge/opposition**. That gives us *adrenaline*.
Games have **problem solving**. That sparks our *creativity*.
Games have **interaction**. That gives us *social groups*.
Games have **representation and story**. That gives us *emotion*.

This would make games lower the affective filter of the players, placing them in an emotional state in which they will improve their language more effectively.

Although this chapter has presented the main theories used in this study, the Monitor Model only offer a series of hypotheses towards how language acquisition occurs. It is important to note that these serve only as hypotheses in this study. How we learn and improve in a language can be attributed to a wide number of factors and to simply see these hypotheses as a definitive explanation of how this occurs is not the purpose in this paper.
3. Method

In this section the methods used in this paper are discussed. As this paper is of a qualitative nature, it is based upon the reflections and interpretations of the interactions with the three participants of the study. Because of this, a couple of research methods have been adopted so that, as Heigham & Crocker (2009) states, a “fuller richer picture of the participants’ perspective can be explored and represented” (p.8).

In order to answer the research questions I have adopted the methods of both letting participants write a reflective journal on their gaming and having individual interviews with them. The two methods serve different purposes in this study, which will be discussed in their respective sections below. The advantages of approaching a qualitative study using two or more different methods can be seen by Heigham & Crocker’s (2009) discussion on this where they state that it “strengthens the conclusions that can be reasonably drawn from the analyses” (p. 266). By approaching these two methods through triangulation I hoped to achieve a deeper perspective on the results.

Both the journal questionnaire and the participants’ results from this, as well as the interviews were conducted in Swedish. As this is the native language of all participants I felt that this would allow them to express themselves more freely and be less constricted by any linguistic barriers. All responses in this paper are thus translated from Swedish to English. Although I strive to avoid it, some meaning might have been lost in these translations.

Also, it has to be noted that as I am not myself an active gamer of WoW, the interpretations that I make based on the results may impact the results of this study. I am unaware of some of the more detailed technical aspects of the game. However, if I was an active player I might have been even more influenced by my own experiences of the game and thus bring in too much of my own perceptions of the game into the results.
3.1 Journal

Initially, the students were given an outline of a journal to write during a few weeks as a means of collecting data for the interview and to let the students notice certain linguistic aspects of the game. The method of keeping a journal over a learning experience to study it is relatively new and, therefore, not many studies have utilized this method (Heigham p. 228). However, as the method of journal studies is an introspective method, it can be seen as a way of accessing learners’ inner thoughts and can be done so in direct connection to the learning experience. As with other qualitative research methods, the use of the journal provides an in-depth look at a few key participants. By asking these participants write in the journal in direct connection to having played the game, the relative trustworthiness of the entries is increased, offering a unique perspective to the study.

Other key advantages compared to alternative methods can be found when using journal studies. As an introspective approach, it can reveal “affective factors, language learning strategies, and [learners’] own perceptions – facets of the language learning experience which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to an external observer” (Bailey, 1983, p. 189).

However, using the method of journal entries might raise a few doubts. When discussing the advantages and disadvantages of using journal entries, Heigham & Crocker (2009) bring up the main constraints when using this method. Of these, two main doubts can be applied to the method in this paper:

First, in a diary study, one uses only a few participants when looking at different factors of language learning and thus “it is difficult to compare the findings of the studies” (Heigham & Crocker, p. 229). As “diary studies are based on subjective data, based entirely on the researcher’s interpretation of the [...] learners’ perceptions, with no other data that allows for verification of the conclusions drawn” (Heigham & Crocker, p. 229), this might make diary studies an inconclusive method to use on its own. It is true that a qualitative research paper is subjected to personal interpretations and much like any other qualitative method, journal studies are no different. However, for this paper the journals will be approached through triangulation where the interviews and journals supplement each other in my analysis of them. The main purpose of the journals are therefore to collect data on what kind of interactions the
participants face and to make them more conscious of the processes connected to language acquisition while playing the game.

This brings the second main doubt to using journals as a research method into light. Especially when studying L2 learners at upper secondary school, “one can question the extent to which individuals can analyze all of the processes involved in their own language learning and teaching experiences” (Heigham & Crocker, p. 229). However, it is the students’ perceptions of their own language acquisition that are the focus of this study which prevents the study from being carried out in any other way. Even though the participants might not be aware of the theories surrounding language acquisition, they will most likely be aware of their own experiences of their language use in the game.

In the journal, the students were asked to answer six questions (see Appendix B). First, I wanted them to report on number of played hours for every journal entry. Secondly, I wanted them to report any new words they had learnt during this play session. This question was formed as a way of getting the participants to be slightly more aware of their language use during their play session, as well as a simple way to get them to reflect on their language use afterwards. The third question was on how they communicated during the gaming session and whether they used the in-game chat function or spoke verbally using headphones. This question could have been overlooked as all participants used the in-game text chat. The fourth question was formed to see if and how English was used by the participants, as it is not always necessary to speak English in the game. The fifth question serves as the main focus point of this research as the participants were here asked to give a reflection on their overall language use. The goal was for them to report on the purpose and function of their language use as well as its results. Finally, the students were asked to give an example of their interactions within the game.
3.2 Interviews

The interviews conducted in this study were semi-structured. In a structured interview all questions are predetermined, which allows for very little freedom for the interviewer to side track and go deeper into different topics that might be of further interest to the study. However, in an open interview (the complete opposite to structured interviews) there are no pre-determined questions before the interview and instead the interviewer will lead the respondent into the direction of the research. A semi-structured interview is a compromise between the two. Before knowing what the participants would answer to my pre-determined questions, it is next to impossible to present relevant follow-up questions. Instead some main topics of discussion were created. From these topics a few questions were formed that would serve as the main structure to the interview. The benefit of this is great as it allows “the interview to develop in unexpected directions where these open up important new areas” (Heigham & Crocker, p. 186).

As the responses to the journal started to come in, the main structure of the interviews started to emerge. Based on Krashen’s Monitor Model, four main topics to be discussed were created with questions relating to them:

As the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis looks at the differences between language learning and language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, p. 36), the participants were asked about their relationship between language that they felt had been learned in school and their language acquisition from WoW. I also wanted to see if they had ever reflected on this at all.

The Monitor Hypothesis looks at the productive skills of language and the level of the interlocutors (Lightbown & Spada, p. 36). Therefore, I wanted to know how the participants feel toward communicating with people that they perceived as either more or less proficient than themselves. Further, I wanted to study if they often change or adapt their language to suit who they are speaking to.

Next, the level of English was to be discussed, according to the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, which states that if the level of English input is appropriate to the learner, the learner will acquire English at a better rate (Lightbown & Spada, p.37). Here, I wanted to investigate whether they see the language used in the game as too difficult or too easy to learn anything from it.
The final topic was on how motivated they become to improve their language through the game. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, games, and in particular WoW, should lower the affective filter and facilitate more affective language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, p.37). I therefore wanted to know if they could identify any motivation towards language learning from their own gaming experience.

3.3 Selection

When selecting participants a few key elements were focused on. At first, I chose not to have any students of my own. A number of reasons can be given for this: mostly that my position as their teacher might influence their responses, but also because their responses might be influenced by my previous knowledge of them. However, as this study asks a lot from the participants, in writing both time consuming and personal journal entries when playing, it required that the students had some incentive to take part. Because of this I asked a fellow teacher colleague and friend of mine for participants that he knew would be up for the challenge. Three of his students agreed to partake.

Unfortunately this was not without its issues, as all three participants were male. The only reason for this is that through my search for participants, I did not come across any female players. I asked my participants if they could specifically ask any female friends who played the game if they would be willing to partake in the study, but none were. It has to be noted that female players of the game are frequent and the male-only selection in this study was only due to the circumstances surrounding the selection process and was not intended.

Adam
Adam is a student at an upper secondary school in Southern Sweden. At the time of the interview, he attended the English A course. He is 16 years old and has played WoW frequently for two years. He states that he spends anywhere between five to fifteen hours a week playing WoW.

Bengt
Bengt started playing WoW at the same time as Adam. He is 17 years old and also attends the English A course of English. Since the summer of 2010, Bengt has spent less and less time
playing *WoW* as he feels it takes up too much of his school time. Before taking part in this study he only played *WoW* a couple of times every month. However, for the purpose of this study, Bengt agreed to resume his playing for a while.

*Carl*

Carl is 17 years old and also attends the English A course at an upper secondary school in Southern Sweden. Carl has played *WoW* for a little more than three years. He usually plays once or twice a week, spending anywhere between two to six hours each time playing the game.

### 3.4 Ethics

This degree paper was made in accordance to some general ethical considerations. As the participants of this study were all minors, their parents’ consent was given prior to them partaking in any study. The aims and purpose of the paper as well as the methods for study were clearly stated to them, and they all conceded with the terms of partaking in the study, as presented in Appendix B. All names of the participants have been altered to protect their identities.
4. Results

In this section the results of the study are presented. First, the journals will be presented and then the interviews.

4.1 Journals

Overall

All in all, I received 13 journal entries from the three participants over a three week period. Adam, the most frequent player, handed in six entries. Bengt handed in three. Carl handed in four. In this section, summaries of all entries will be presented. The entries will be referred to as A:1 for Adam’s first entry, B:2 for Bengt’s second entry or C:3 for Carl’s third entry, and so on.

Although I asked the students to write out examples of actual dialogue, I did not receive any. This could probably be due to the chat function not being as easily manageable as I had first predicted, making transcribing the text the only way to provide actual examples of the interactions. However, I did receive examples of some discussion topics or examples of what was discussed.

Adam

As the most frequent player of WoW, Adam also provided the most journal entries. A total of six were handed in.

A:1

In his first entry, Adam had played for about two hours. He did not learn any new words. However, he reported on remembering an old word he had forgotten until now: curious. During his two hours of play, he spoke English for about one and a half hour. The other players were mostly non-native English speakers themselves. The topics of interaction with other players were mainly in order to complete a quest. He also spoke to one co-player about a motorbike, reporting that the other player had just purchased one and was now working on it. Adam also had a problem connected to the game and had to send an email in English to the
“game master”, i.e. the person responsible for dealing with technical support issues within the game.

A:2
After playing for three hours, and using English about 75% of the time, Adam had learnt a few new words: suppress, totem and dizzy. Adam reports on interacting much on the same topics as the previous day. In addition to this, he had also received a reply from the game master. On this reply, Adam reported that “since they [the game master] have to be understood by everyone, at least in English, what they wrote was like taken from a book” and “I can really tell a difference between levels of English in what people write in the game and on websites”. He continues to say that ”[I] have a theory that if you are with people who speak/write bad English, you automatically become a little worse yourself, and if you speak/write with those that know English well, you try harder subconsciously to write as correctly as possible and more formally, like when I wrote to the game master”.

A:3
As this entry was written around Christmas, Adam offers an insight into how the holiday becomes apparent in the game in his third entry. For example, there were extra Christmas achievements that could be completed in the game. On that note, Adam states that the word achievement is a tough word to translate into Swedish and offers a description of the word as something that you accomplish. In the game, however, he describes it as serving as a reward for completing a specific task. Another new word Adam learned was to wrap around or wrap in presents. On this he says that “even though this word is very simple and almost laughable, it is these small words that build up the vocabulary more and make the language easier to grasp”. He even reports on ‘singing’ Christmas carols in the text-based chat on the server! Here, he reports on being eager to fill in the ‘song’ with the sentences he knew – “I have to admit that I actually got into the Christmas spirit sitting there and writing ‘Rudolph the red nose reindeer – had a very shiny nose!’”.

A:4
For this session Adam had played for five hours. He learned two new words: interchangeable and thorough. By being told to farm (i.e. to perform simple and sometimes repetitive tasks for valuables) thoroughly, he stated to have understood that “[it] must have something to do with doing a good job”. This time he also claims to have used English 75% of the time. In Adam’s
fourth entry, he discussed the importance of being respectful in the in-game chat. “Sometimes you meet people that do not seem to understand that there are real people sitting on the other side of the computer.[…] If you write racist comments you will be banned directly, but not always if you bully someone or if you are impolite and disrespectful”.

A:5
Adam’s fifth entry was relatively short. He had played for little over an hour, speaking English about half of the time. No new words were reported. The interactions were centered mostly around tactical strategies on performing raids (a group effort to complete a specific mission). Adam states that “I did not share in any discussions or anything. Usually, I do but not today”, perhaps revealing that the communicative nature of the game is rather optional.

A:6
In his final entry, Adam had played for 4 hours. Although not stating that he learnt any new words, he claimed to have learnt the meaning of waving a white flag, stating that “I’ve seen it done before, but when someone in the chat mentioned waving a white flag, I understood that it has to do with surrendering”.

Bengt

B:1
In his first journal entry, Bengt talks about his relationship to the game. He states that although "the game is engaging in every way, I do not enjoy playing it so much any more. It takes too much time to get engaged in it, and because there is so much to do, I can spend hours playing the game every day, and still feel like I want to play more”. He then explains that this has led him to hardly play the game anymore, as it takes up too much of his school time. However, for this study he has resumed playing as it is only temporary and during the holidays. When writing this entry, Bengt had played two sessions of around three hours each, speaking English “most of the time”. He had not learned any new words and the interactions he had centered on instruction between players within the guild on how to perform different tasks. “The instructions that are given in most missions are so tactical and military so it becomes very important to follow them”, he stated. “It is funny because some people are just not serious at all about following instructions, and some get super excited about doing it”, he adds.
In his second journal entry, Bengt reports to have played for around three hours, sticking only to English “even when [he] spoke to Swedes”. Although indentifying a number of unknown words in English, no new words were reportedly learned. The interactions were on the same topics as in the previous journal entry. Upon this he had entered a discussion on Christmas traditions with a few other players from “different European countries”.

For his third journal entry, Bengt had written up all new words he had heard as he was playing. He listed the 15 new words and their translation. How long time he played for or how much of that time he spoke English was not reported. The interactions centered around completing missions, explaining missions and general gaming mechanics as well as a few discussions. Bengt expressed some benefits from having more experience than his co-players when it came to one mission. “I had beaten it once already and knew what had to be done and what the enemies were like, so I could give a lot of advise to [the other co-players] here”.

In his first journal, Carl played for approximately two hours, reportedly using English for one and a half hours. No new words were presented. He reported on playing with “many players that do not have English as their mother tongue […] just like [himself].” He states that the other players “used a lot of abbreviations which led to a few misunderstandings”. Upon this, Carl expressed that ”I feel that it is good that there are games where you can play with others and speak a common language” and “during the summer it is great to play because you keep up the English language if you do not go abroad”. The interactions were simply reported as “good because I used them to get tactical advice”.

After playing for three hours, and speaking English for about two hours, Carl reports that “today we performed a raid and since I play tank [a strong player that takes a lot of damage], I had a very important [role] in the raid. Therefore, it was especially important that I kept to the game plan”. No new words were reported in this journal entry.
In his third journal entry, Carl reports to have played for three hours, speaking English for approximately two. In this entry, Carl provides a discussion on the importance of language proficiency and not making mistakes in the game: “…I made a mistake between left and right… I felt a bit stupid and was even told off by [another player] […] It is like this often when knowing the language well is really important. Of course I know the difference between left and right but in the heat of the battle I sometimes forget such things and this sometimes costs a lot”.

Carl wrote his final journal entry after having played for four hours, using English “most of the time”. No new words were reportedly learned, and no other discussion topics were reported on. Carl did not report on anything else during this session.

4.2 Interviews

Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis

Through the interview it became apparent that the participants had a rather complex attitude towards the differences between using English in school and within the game. In his interview, Carl stated that “school is probably the best place to learn English, but the game is probably a better place to use it”, showing awareness of the differences between language use in class and in the game. Bengt also noted this difference, describing his learning in English class through grammar and wordlists, whereas in the game he needed to see a word a few times before making an effort to look it up. This indicates a belief that proficiency in English is not as desirable in WoW as in school, which coheres with the fact that Bengt does not play the game anymore.

It seems that all participants were positive towards the English use in the game. Adam showed this through stating that “of course I learned a lot of English through the game”. He also made a distinction between the game and English class by stating that he plays the game for fun and not because he has to, whereas in school he feels that he has to attend. Bengt states that “[the] sentences I use [in the game] give me more of a feeling that I learn more of the language itself”, perhaps indicating the main difference between language acquisition and language learning. Finally, Carl shows his positive attitude towards the game by stating that “I have
learned so much more in the game than I would have in school”. Thus, all three participants agreed upon the fact that playing WoW does improve their language skills. Adam also added to this by remembering a few times when he used skills that he had recently acquired in the game in English class at school and vice versa.

On the other hand, they also all seemed to agree that the potential benefits of acquiring English by playing WoW should not be overestimated. Adam emphasized the importance of learning English in school because there he receives a “base to rely on” in the form of grammatical knowledge before engaging in dialogue in the game. Bengt talked about his uncertainty toward correctness. Because WoW is a fantasy inspired game, a lot of the vocabulary used is not common outside the game. Some words do not even exist outside the context of the game. To highlight the problematic nature of this issue, Bengt talked about the word botanist. He stated that “I thought it had to do only with the game and it was not used otherwise”. He therefore said that becoming proficient in the language used in the game is not enough to become proficient in the language used outside of the game. The conclusion can therefore be drawn that Bengt and Adam, at least, believe that a balance must exist between learning in school and in the game for the game to fully utilize its learning potential.

*Monitor Hypothesis*

According to the monitor hypothesis, the language output is influenced by who the learner is communicating with. If the learner is more anxious to produce a correct sentence the spontaneous language use will be obstructed. The participants offered many insights into this matter.

In accordance to the Monitor Model, all participants agreed that they found it harder or had more anxiety towards speaking with someone who was a native or a more proficient speaker of English. Adam mentioned him adjusting his level of English to suit the level of the person he was speaking to. He also noted that when speaking to “somebody who is better at English”, he improved on his own level English. Also, when speaking to people who are less proficient than himself, Adam reported that he tries to “make [his own] language easier” and that he in these cases almost becomes worse at English. Bengt mentioned that he “uses more advanced forms of English with more advanced speakers”. Carl noted that it is important to use correct language in the game since if he makes mistakes, people would be disappointed with him. However, Carl stated that this might not be something negative as “you have to think about
the language you use before you can learn from it”. The participants all agreed that the level of English used by their co-players have a great impact on what language they use themselves.

The effects of the Monitor Hypothesis can be seen in some of the students’ reflections. Adam stated insightfully that “[fluency] is always easier when there is no stress [attached] to it and speaking to someone with more knowledge that you equals more stress”. Bengt stated that in the cases where the level of English used is higher, he felt more “nervous and unsure of how to say things” and that especially when speaking to a native speaker, he does not want to make any mistakes. Carl mentions that ”the importance of correct language is often very clear in the game. If you make mistakes, you will fail and then no one will like you”. He also noted that when using a voice chat, he was more nervous at first, only to feel more at ease after a while and then learning more through it than through the text-based chat. Carl compares this to school, stating that speaking “in class is worse than in the game. There I almost never feel forced to be correct all the time”. Similarly, Adam talked about the chat function in the game as something that removes much of the stress when communicating with others. He compared this to when he was in London and had the opportunity to speak face to face with native speakers, which was much more stressful than through the chat. It therefore seems that the participants all agree that there is a lot of stress attached to communication in English and that much of this stress is removed through the game.

**Comprehensible Input Hypothesis**

When the three participants in this study were asked about the level of English used within the game and how they felt it affected their ability to develop their language, they gave a few different responses; Adam, who began playing the game in Swedish, felt “more and more comfortable speaking to others in English” over time. He also said that he did not often come across many new words or concepts in the game. He stated, however, that the number of new words that he heard and noticed increased while writing the journal. This, he attributed to consciously thinking about the language while writing the journal entries. Bengt gave a similar description of the language in the game stating that “I was young when I started and a lot of words […] were new and very hard to understand”. Later, he progressed though as he played, understanding “more and more”. Also, Bengt stated that he learned more from getting a wordlist or writing new words down and than through the input from the game. He did, however learn a lot from speaking to others.
Carl gave a different viewpoint from that of Adam and Bengt. Whereas Adam and Bengt did not report to have learned a lot from the language input of WoW, Carl did. He believed that the language in the game was easy, but that he still learned a lot from it. If he came across anything he did not understand, Carl stated that “I still get by. […] There are a lot of things I do not understand, but it usually does not matter because the language is not the point of the game”. Carl also reports on learning many new words and idiomatic expressions from the game, especially “compared to just reading where you can see a new word and look it up and then move on to the next”.

According to the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, the level of input needs to be slightly higher than the level of the learner's current level. Neither participant reported on having many difficulties with the language used in the game, whereas Carl still stated that he learned a lot from it. Although Carl claimed that the language was easy, it still provided him with enough comprehensible input to learn from it. The other two participants, however, did not.

**Affective Filter Hypothesis**

On the topic of the Affective Filter Hypothesis, a few key points were discussed. The affective filter determines how one’s emotional state towards improving in a new language affects the ability to actually learn it. Therefore, the issue of motivation to learn was brought up. Carl did not have much to say on this, but Adam and Bengt were very positive, both stating that the game gives a lot of incentive to become proficient in English. Adam stated that “the better you are at English, the more you can talk to others and the game becomes easier”. Bengt also believed that being good at English is important in the game. I mentioned to Bengt the notion put forward by Rankin et al. (2009), that a proficient use of English equals more initiative within the game and thus proficiency in the language is sought after. Bengt agreed to this, stating that “I can recognize that. By playing and understanding that the level of English matters, I can remember trying to use better English, as good [English] as possible”. It seems that by being proficient in English, the game becomes both easier and grants more initiative. This motivated both Adam and Bengt to improve and be conscious about their language use in the game. Bengt even noted how his level of English is a way of showing off in a game where the level of your character is the only other way to really stand out by stating that “[the level of English you use] is after all the most noticeable thing you can do in the game to show off a bit. […]” Except for the level your character is at, the level of your English is probably the
easiest and most important way to show off”. This should, however, still be seen in the light of Carl’s statement from his interview: that any new language he learned does not really matter in the game, as language is “not the point of the game”.

As a final topic, we discussed if schools should utilize MMORPGs as a tool for teaching. To this Carl agreed, saying that “schools should use the same game type as in the game but not this game. Because we have role plays in [English class] and this is a role playing game […]. When we have role play it is fun. So, it makes you speak more easily. […] The game can then also be a way to get better at this, to speak more […] just not in the same way, I think”. I asked him if this meant redesigning the game into a new format more suitable for school. “Yes, not war maybe, but like The Sims[another simulation game]: kinder and with points and missions”. I asked Adam if he thought it would be a good idea to use WoW in school in any way and on this he answered that “if they did that I would probably learn more from it. Like I said when you gave me the journal, I think I thought more about what I learned from the game and looked things up more so therefore I remembered [the new words] better”. He continued by saying ”but I also have to say that not everyone would like to play games and so to spend as much time as I do with it would not be so fun for others and I think you need to spend a lot of time with it to learn anything”. Bengt stated that “I do not believe that [the game] should be used in school. I know many who do not like the game”. He also stated that “[the students] in my class who do not play [the game] would not be further motivated to learn English by playing in class. This is not how to learn in school.” So it seems that all three participants shared the view that WoW should not be used as a teaching tool in school. However, both Adam and Carl indicated that games in general can be used if they are used in the correct way.
5. Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the potential benefits of the English use in the game *WoW* to students of English. If this game can increase the rate of which students become more proficient in English, there might be a lot to learn from it when either designing new teaching materials or developing methods for teaching English. Through this research I have gained a deeper understanding of some of the benefits with the game in this respect. As well as this, I have come to see some precautions that should be taken when considering the game in an educational setting. These issues will be discussed in this section of the paper.

In the journal the participants were given the opportunity to report on their interactions within the game. The entries from these journals provided much more of a discussion on the language use than expected. Although not expressively asked to do so, the participants all gave examples and insight into their general language development through playing the game. This was actually rather unexpected as the participants were not asked to give this insight in the journals as this was to be discussed in the interviews. This might be due to, as Bengt stated during the interviews, the game often being criticized and “under so much negative discussion by parents and teachers that this [opportunity] is good, that we can defend it for once”. This statement is not to be overlooked. As previously discussed, research has often proven that the linguistic advantages of the game are great. Therefore, this discussion does not receive as much attention as it deserves, as it is often overshadowed by the fact that the game is violent, time consuming and addictive. According to the participants in this study, the game is important to their language acquisition. However, they feel that the positive aspects of the game are overshadowed by the discussion of the negative aspects of it, such as it being highly addictive and violent.

Through the journals and interviews it became apparent that the participants were all very aware of their language acquisition through the game. However, the three participants were not as positive towards the learning benefits from the game as I had first believed they would be and even reflected on many negative aspects of learning English from a video game. One of these issues is the result of the fact that *WoW* and the fantasy inspired world created in the game contains words and expressions that are not common or does not exist outside the context of the game. Bengt described his difficulties in distinguishing between these words when they are new to him. He does not always know when a word is used outside the game or
if is used only in the context of WoW. While this might be true, if we look at the words that the participants reported to have learned in their journals, they are all words that are used outside the game. They even reported on learning common idiomatic expressions, about cultural traditions such as Christmas and social symbols such as waving a white flag, all of which hold the same meaning outside of the game. Further, it might also be argued that the participants still learn the grammatical structures and spellings of English words even when using mock words (Thorne et al., 2009). The skill that players mostly need in this situation is to be able to identify when a word might not be appropriate to use outside the game and how to find out if a new word is commonly used in other contexts.

The discussion surrounding the Monitor Hypothesis, gave some interesting insights into the participants’ language use. Not surprisingly, and in accordance with the Monitor Hypothesis, the participants found it more important to produce correct sentences, or felt more anxiety, when speaking with more proficient users of English. This also occurred in situations where communicative mistakes could result in failing important tasks. However, both Carl and Adam stated that speaking face to face with somebody is worse than in the game, showing that the game offers them some relief to their anxiety when speaking English. In his interview, Carl noted that the role play elements in the game reminded him of the role play in his English class and that this was a big factor in facilitating a more anxiety free setting where he could interact more freely. As an English teacher, I often face the problem of students who are unwilling to speak in class. If a game such as WoW can offer players this relief, it might be of importance to try to incorporate this into the English classroom. If so, L2 learners who feel very obstructed when speaking English in class would be able to speak and interact more freely in the classroom.

When discussing how to implement a game such as WoW into the English classroom, a few interesting aspects were brought up. Adam and Bengt both agree upon the fact that the game on its own is not an optimal source from which to acquire English. However, they both reported on having learned more from playing the game when writing a journal, and reflecting on their own language use. This gives me as a teacher some inspiration as to how to bring in a game such as WoW into the English classroom. If I were to ask students who play WoW to reflect on their own language acquisition whilst playing and giving the opportunity to discuss their language in class, students can report on their development and can study new words and expressions they come across.
However, as many students do not enjoy playing this particular game or video games in general, I would never ask all my students to engage in the game. This would probably have the wrong results. As Adam and Carl agreed on, games in general might have positive results in the classroom, but to ask students who do not enjoy playing video games to participate in WoW would not have the same stimulating effects as for students who enjoy video games. In their study, Barr et al. (2006), conclude that video games hold an important potential in the English classroom because the reward system is built into the game and not governed by an outside source, such as the teacher. For this purpose I would like to see games developed that facilitate language learning, just not as the main goal of the game, and that are more accessible to students who do not engage in video games often.
6. Conclusion

This paper has looked at how the three participants have acquired English through the game *World of Warcraft*, according to the *Monitor Hypothesis*. By both providing journal entries, describing their language use in direct relation to the learning experience, as well as the following interviews, they have given many insights into their linguistic development through the game. According to the participants, *WoW* offers them the chance to develop language skills that are not possible to work with in a typical English classroom. The participants reported on acquiring new vocabulary and expressions and learning about cultural traditions and symbolic social gestures. The participants also reported that they were generally both motivated to having a proficient language use and at the same time not feeling the same anxiety towards making mistakes as when speaking to a peer face-to-face, or to a teacher. This granted more initiative in their language production.

However, through the interviews and journals, it became apparent according to the participants of this study that the game alone does not offer the most optimal learning opportunities when acquiring English. First of all, the game is not enjoyed by everyone and should therefore not be played by everyone. This takes away much of the possibility to use the game first hand within the English classroom. Secondly, the participants reported on having gained more from playing the game when writing the journals, as this gave them an opportunity to reflect on their language use. Through these different insights from the participants, a few conclusions surrounding how this game might be integrated into the English classroom have become apparent. For the game to become as effective as possible it is important that I as a teacher offer the players opportunities to reflect on and discuss their language use in the game. This can be done by either setting up workshops or having students write journals similar to the ones used in this study. Thirdly, the participants showed some confusion when seeing new words and as *WoW* uses a lot of words that exist only within the game it is not always clear to the students when these words are acceptable outside the context of the game. Therefore, they need further opportunities to reflect on the new words and to try and come up with helpful strategies to overcome this confusion.
7. References


TACK PÅ FÖRHAND!

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0730-xx xx xx

xxxxxxxxxx@xxxxx.com

Jag godkänner att svaren i undersökningen (loggbok och intervjun) får användas i examensarbetet:

Namn:____________________________ Målsmans namn:____________________________________

Underskrift:________________________ ______________________________


1. Antal spelade timmar.
2. Eventuella nya ord du lärt dig.
3. Hur kommunicerade du med motspelare? (Skriftligt/muntligt?)
4. Vilken språk användes? Hur ofta användes engelska?
5. Vilken sorts interaktioner hade du med andra spelare på engelska? Det vill säga vilket syfte tjänade interaktionerna; var det för att ge instruktioner, beskrivningar, diskussioner, socialt, eller i något annat syfte? Vad sades och vad fick du ut av interaktionen?

För att tillförlitligheten i din reflektion ska vara så hög som möjligt är det viktigt att du tidsmässigt svarar så nära intill ditt spelande som möjligt. Skriv minst en logg, men spelar du mer än en gång, för då gärna en logg efter varje gång du spelar.

TACK FÖR DITT DELTAGANDE!!
Appendices

Appendix B
Gaming Journal, English Translation
Hello! Since I am currently on my final term of the teacher’s education program, I am writing my degree paper. This paper is on the subject of some English students’ language acquisition through the game World of Warcraft. In this game, English is used through the means of different communicative forms, which is why it is of interest for me to study through a pedagogical perspective. As I am studying what kind of interactions players encounter in the game, I have developed a journal that I would like for you to write. Upon this, I will also be interviewing you. This interview will take approximately an hour. The answers will be presented completely anonymously and will only be used for the purpose of my degree paper. If you agree to this, I will need both you and your legal guardian’s signature.

THANK YOU IN ADVANCE!

William Heathcote, Malmö Högskola, Lärarutbildningen
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I approve that the answers in the study (journal and interview) may be used in the degree paper:

Name:_________________________ Legal Guardian’s name:_________________________

Signature:_________________________ ________________________________

The following should be filed in as close to you playing as possible! When you play, take notes surrounding the questions below. When you have finished playing, summarize your notes surrounding your language use. Preferably, write directly on a computer so that you can easily email it to me. Every journal entry should be approximately one to two pages. You reflection should answer the following:

1. Number of played hours
2. Any new words you have learned
3. How did you communicate with your co-players (orally/written)
4. Which languages did you use? How often did you use English?
5. What kind of interactions did you have with other players in English? In other words, what was the general purpose of the interactions; giving instructions, descriptions, discussions, social or any other purpose? What was said and what did you gain from the discussion?
6. Give examples of one or more dialogues you have had with one or more co-players in English.

It is important that you write your reflection as soon as you have finished playing, for credibility. Write at least one journal entry for each time that you play.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION!!